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(54) Title: METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR VERIFYING PRODUCT SALE TRANSACTIONS AND PROCESSING PRODUCT RETURNS
(54) Titre: PROCEDE ET APPAREIL POUR VERIFIER LES OPERATIONS DE VENTE DE PRODUITS ET POUR TRAITER LES RENVOIS DE PRODUITS

(57) Abstract

A product registration system for verifying product returns. The system stores product and return policies information on purchased product in central computer system (14). Registration information on purchased products sold at terminal (2) of local retailer (6) are transferred to the retailer's local database (8). When a product is being returned an operator terminal (11) is used by a store clerk to locate pertinent sales information in the local database (8). A communication channel (12) is provided between the retailer computer system (6) and a central computer system (14) which stores product transactions and product registration data for a number of different retailer computer systems (6) and other manufacturers. Compliance with return policies are checked prior to accepting a product for return.

(57) Abrégé

L'invention concerne un système d'enregistrement de produits permettant de vérifier des renvois de produits. Ce système est destiné à mémoriser dans un système informatique central (14) les données relatives aux produits et aux conditions de renvoi de produits vendus, et à transférer les données mémorisées relatives aux produits vendus par le terminal (2) d'un revendeur (6) à la base de données locale (8) de ce revendeur. Si un produit est renvoyé, un employé du magasin utilise alors un terminal de l'utilisateur (11) pour extraire de ladite base de données locale (8) des données pertinentes concernant les ventes. Un canal de communication (12) relie par ailleurs le système informatique (6) du revendeur à un système informatique central (14), destiné à mémoriser les données relatives aux opérations de vente de produits et à l'enregistrement des produits provenant des systèmes informatiques (6) de différents revendeurs; et d'autres fabricants. Ce système permet notamment de vérifier le respect des conditions de renvoi avant que ne soit accepté le renvoi d'un produit.

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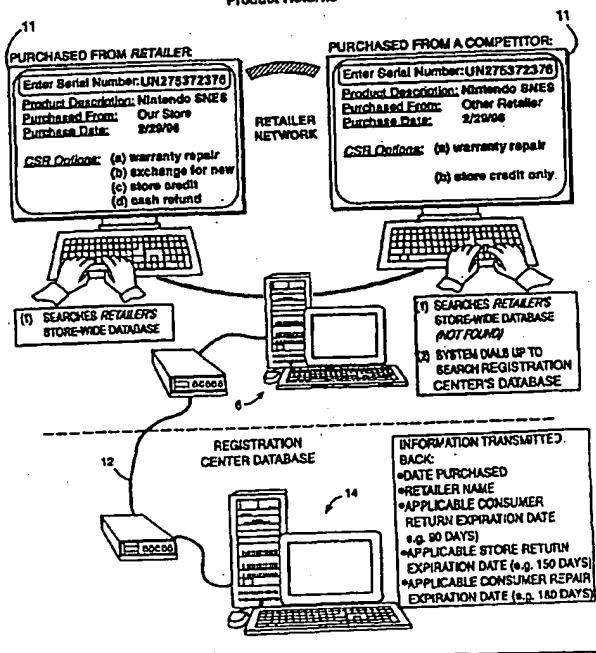
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(54) Title: METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR VERIFYING PRODUCT SALE TRANSACTIONS AND PROCESSING PRODUCT RETURNS

(57) Abstract

A product registration system for verifying product returns. The system stores product and return policies information on purchased product in central computer system (14). Registration information on purchased products sold at terminal (2) of local retailer (6) are transferred to the retailer's local database (8). When a product is being returned an operator terminal (11) is used by a store clerk to locate pertinent sales information in the local database (8). A communication channel (12) is provided between the retailer computer system (6) and a central computer system (14) which stores product transactions and product registration data for a number of different retailer computer systems (6) and other manufacturers. Compliance with return policies are checked prior to accepting a product for return.

Customer Service Desk
Product Returns



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5 **METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR VERIFYING
PRODUCT SALE TRANSACTIONS AND PROCESSING PRODUCT
RETURNS**

10 5 **CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS**

This application claims priority on U.S. provisional application Serial Nos. 60/108,170 filed November 13, 1998 and 60/119,631 filed February 11, 1999, the disclosures of which are each hereby incorporated by reference in their entirety.

The present application is related to allowed, commonly-owned, and co-pending application Serial Nos. 08/725,259 filed October 2, 1996, and Serial No. 09/065,552, filed April 24, 1998, each of which is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety. This application is also related to commonly-owned and co-pending application Serial No. 09/065,552 filed April 24, 1998, the disclosure of which is also hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety.

30 **BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION**

35 1. Field of the Invention

20 The present invention relates to a computer based system that provides a method for real time data storage and retrieval for the purpose of verifying and validating sales transactions and product return/warranty repair eligibility. Additionally, the present invention relates to an improved electronic system for registering product transactions and to a method for efficient handling of product 45 25 return transactions. More particularly, the present invention relates to an electronic registration system which facilitates compliance with return policies and is useful in reducing improper or fraudulent product returns under warranty, and which provides related functionality to third parties and the like.

5

2. Related Art

Product returns are a market reality faced by virtually every manufacturer,
10 distributor, supplier or retailer of commercial products. Unfortunately, handling
distributor, supplier or retailer of commercial products. Unfortunately, handling
5 product returns often requires a significant expenditure of resources. For
example, it may be necessary to employ one or more individuals to verify that
product returns satisfy the requirements of a company's return policy. This
15 process can be complicated due to the fact that a particular retailer often carries
numerous different type of products from different manufacturers, each of which
20 often has their own return and warranty policies and procedures. As a result, the
personnel responsible for processing the product return transactions at, for
example, a retail store, must know or manually look-up the applicable return
25 policies and procedures for the particular product that a person is attempting to
return. This is a difficult, time-consuming, and error-prone process that often
30 results in improper acceptance or rejection of product returns and/or warranty
claims at the retail level. Once a product is accepted for return at the retail level,
the retailer then typically returns the product to the manufacturer for credit.
35 However, when the retail store accepts a product return that does not comply
with the manufacturers return policy, problems result between the retailer and
40 the manufacturer because the manufacturer will refuse or be reluctant to accept
the returned product from the retailer. Moreover, significant time and expense is
wasted when a retailer improperly accepts products for return that do not comply
45 with the manufacturer's return policy. Often times the improperly returned
products are shipped to the manufacturer and then are simply returned to the
50 retailer upon be rejected for return by the manufacturer. This results in
significant wasted shipping charges and employee time in attempting to resolve
such matters. This situation can also result in significant tension between the

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retailer and the manufacturer. In other words, when a returns are not properly handled at the retail level, numerous problems result for the retailer and the manufacturer.

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Alternatively, a company might choose to avoid the increased overhead associated with additional employees and be somewhat less diligent about verifying compliance with the return policy. However, this alternative can increase costs due to the higher number of improper product returns. Either way, additional costs must either by borne by the company or passed along to the consumer.

20

In addition to the costs associated with verifying compliance with a return policy, even proper product returns incur additional administrative costs.

25

Examples of such costs include shipping and handling of the returned product, repackaging and redistribution of the returned product (if appropriate), disposal of certain returned products, and the like. These costs must also be borne either by the company or by the consumer in the form of higher prices.

30

It is, of course, desirable to minimize costs associated with product returns to permit reduced prices to the customer and/or provide improved operating margins for the manufacturer and/or the retailer. There are two major areas in which savings may be realized: (1) reducing the number of improper or fraudulent returns; and (2) improving efficiency and reducing overhead in handling proper returns.

40

Manufacturers, retailers and other vendors of consumer products often have a standard return policy. For example, a retailer return policy might allow a consumer to return a purchased product for any reason within a certain number of days (e.g., 10 days) after purchase. Additionally, a manufacturer's warranty may permit return of defective products within a particular time period (e.g., 90 days) after purchase, and provide for repairs of defective products within a

5 different time period (e.g., 180 days). Repairs of products after that date would
be the responsibility of the consumer. Such return policies are intended to
ensure consumer satisfaction while protecting the manufacturer and/or the
10 retailer from improper returns. As a result, a delicate balance must be
5 maintained between protection of the retailer or manufacturer and consumer
15 satisfaction.

15 Unfortunately, it is often difficult to monitor product returns to ensure
proper compliance with a return policy. For example, a consumer who received
20 a product as a gift usually will not have a sales receipt. In such a situation, an
10 uninformed decision must often be made to accept the return or not. If the return
is not accepted, the consumer might unfairly be denied a proper return, and the
retailer and the manufacturer risk suffering a loss of goodwill. On the other
25 hand, if the return is accepted, the retailer and/or the manufacturer will incur
expenses or losses which might be unwarranted. Some retailers seek to
30 15 minimize the effect of possible improper returns by limiting a consumer to store
credit (rather than a refund) or exchanges on items returned without a receipt.
This alternative, however, may be unacceptable to a consumer and does not
35 completely eliminate the retailers' exposure to improper returns.

35 Difficulties associated with returns made without a receipt stem primarily
40 20 from the inability of the retailer to obtain purchase information (such as sales
date, place of purchase, etc.) concerning the individual item for which a return is
sought. Without such information, it is usually impossible for the retailer to
45 determine whether the return is in compliance with the return policy.

45 In addition to the foregoing, fraudulent returns can cost product retailers
50 25 and manufacturers significant sums of money. As an example, upon release of
the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (Super NES), Nintendo experienced a
high volume of returns of basic NES hardware. When the returned products

were evaluated, it was discovered that a high percentage of the products were not defective and, in fact, were several years old. Thus, customers were abusing the retailer's return policy to exchange old products and upgrade to the new system. Such abuses increase costs to the retailers and manufacturers. These costs are often passed on to purchasers without any attendant benefit to legitimate

While companies generally try to prevent fraudulent returns, the personnel responsible for processing such returns do not have the suitable resources and/or information needed to assure that only proper returns are accepted. This problem is compounded when the consumer does not have a receipt because it has been lost or because the product was received as a gift from another person. While many of these situations represent legitimate return requests, a significant percentage of such return requests are fraudulently made by consumers.

Unscrupulous consumers have in recent years become increasingly creative in their attempts to return merchandise which does not in fact qualify for return under the purchase agreement. For example, a customer may purchase a product at a reduced price at one store and then attempt to return the product to another store for a profit. Customers have also been known to purchase a new product and then return an older or defective product (which no longer qualifies for return or warranty repair) in the new product packaging, thereby obtaining the new product at no cost. Under current practice, retailers are at a significant disadvantage in connection with product return requests, because they typically do not know whether a product has been purchased from their store or another store, or even how much was originally paid for the product even if the product was purchased at its store. Return audits have shown that a significant number of consumers use this disadvantage to their personal benefit and at the cost of the retailer and manufacturer.

5 In the past several years, retailers and the industry have shown renewed
interest in curbing the volume of unwarranted and fraudulent product returns.
10 This interest is largely due to diminishing profit margins and the competitive
nature of the retailing business. Because of thin profit margins, retailers and
15 manufacturers can no longer absorb the cost of unjustified product returns.
Unless product returns are significantly reduced, retailers and/or manufacturers
will have little choice but to pass these costs on to the consumer in the form of
price increases.

20 Prompt and efficient handling of returns and proper enforcement of return
10 policies helps to keep down costs while maintaining consumer confidence and
satisfaction. However, efforts to speed handling or improve enforcement lose
25 their value if the expense of those efforts outweighs the accompanying benefit.
Accordingly, such efforts must be efficient to benefit the manufacturers, retailer
and the consumer.

30 Another problem confronted by retailers stems from the fact that different
15 manufactures may have different return policies. For example, one manufacturer
may require returns to take place within 90 days of the original purchase,
35 whereas others may permit returns up to 120 days or 180 days after the original
purchase. Similarly, some manufacturers may have strict limitations on product
20 returns without original packaging or returns of products wherein relatively
minor parts (e.g., instruction manuals, connecting cables, etc.) are missing.
Because of the variety of manufacturer return policies, it is often difficult for a
40 retailer to ensure proper compliance. As a practical matter, it may be extremely
difficult or even impossible to educate the retailer staff with regard to each return
45 policy. This problem is compounded by the fact that manufacturers and/or
25 retailers may have returns policies that vary between products. Moreover, a
50 retailer often carries products for many different retailers. Manufacturers or

5 retailers may also have special return or warranty policies for products which are
sold at reduced prices, for example. Some manufacturers may also only allow
10 returns that are within a specified period of time starting from the date of
shipment to the retailer, rather than from the date the product is purchased by a
15 consumer. In fact, in today's market it is not uncommon for a single
manufacturer or retailer to have numerous different return and/or warranty
policies that apply depending on the particular product and the particular
conditions under which the product was purchased.

20 Thus, retailers may be placed in a position where improper returns are
10 inadvertently accepted or where proper returns are rejected. Accepting improper
returns increases costs which must either be absorbed or passed on to customers
25 in the form of higher prices or restocking fees, for example. Of course, rejecting
proper returns may damage goodwill between the vendor and the customer.

30 Accordingly, there is a need for a system which facilitates authorized
15 product returns for a number of different manufacturers and/or products yet
reduces the incidence of unauthorized returns. Additionally, there is a need for a
35 product purchase registration system which minimizes costs associated with
returns, improves retailer efficiency in handling product returns, increases
overall customer satisfaction, and provides retailers with immediate access to
40 purchase data information for products of various manufacturers. Further, there
is a need for additional capabilities in connection with product sale information.
For example, third party warranty providers, law enforcement agencies,
45 insurance providers, reverse logistics organizations and the like may utilize
product registration information to verify ownership or sales data and to benefit
25 rightful owners of purchased goods.

50 It is a primary object of the present invention to satisfy these needs. A
further object of the present invention is to enable retailers to more efficiently

5 and effectively enforce applicable product return/warranty policies, even in situations in which the person seeking the return no longer has the sales receipt.

10 Another object of the invention is to reduce fraudulent product returns, and to protect the retailer and manufacturer from the cost and inconvenience associated therewith.

15 5 A further object of the invention, is to provide a method and system available at the return location, such as a retail store check-out counter or customer service counter, which is operable to quickly and accurately verify whether the particular product sought to be returned does or does not qualify for return under the applicable return criteria for that particular product, prior to

20 10 accepting the product for return. Another object of the invention is to provide the customer with useful information regarding the product even if the product does not qualify for return, thereby improving customer satisfaction even when returns are not accepted. Yet another object of the invention is to reduce the need to return products by providing technical information regarding set-up or

25 15 operation of the product to the consumer for the purpose of solving a problem the consumer is having with the product, thereby reducing the need to return products. Still another object of the invention is to provide the store personnel with information on the particular product being returned, which information enables verification of whether or not the product being returned includes all of

30 20 the original parts or components prior to accepting the product for return.

40

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

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The present invention achieves these and other objects by providing an electronic registration and verification system which uses individual product identification information for purchased products gathered at the point of a sales transaction and stored in one or more transaction databases. In an example

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5 embodiment of the present invention, individual product identification
information (such as a unique serial number) is stored in a local transaction
database along with additional information including at least the date of the
10 transaction. A transaction receipt such as a customer sales receipt is created and
5 includes at least the unique product identification information and the date of the
transaction. Additionally, the individual product identification information and
the transaction date may be communicated to a separate location for inclusion in
15 a general transaction database. The local transaction database may include, for
example, sales made by a particular store or sales made by several affiliated
20 stores and is not necessarily co-located with the point of sale. The local
transaction database may also organize the data by individual manufacturer for
ease of access.

25 The instant invention enables a store clerk or the like to obtain real-time
electronic verification of a particular product sale transaction as well as the
30 currently available return/warranty options for a particular product presented for
return.

35 Where a serial number is used to identify the individual product, a check
digit may be used in conjunction with the serial number. In this way, the
validity of the serial number may be verified and, if it is invalid, a system
40 operator may be prompted to re-enter the serial number. The serial number may
be scanned, entered with a keypad, or input with any other suitable technique.
Because each manufacturer will likely utilize a different check digit algorithm, it
will be necessary for the registration system to chose an algorithm which is
45 appropriate for the particular product.

50 25 Prior to obtaining individual product identification information, the
electronic registration system may identify the type of product by evaluating, for
example, the product SKU number derived from a universal product code

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5 (UPC). In this example, the individual product identification information is obtained only if the product is of a type for which electronic registration is desired.

10 The point of transaction information including the individual product

15 identification information and the transaction date may be communicated for use in a general database in a number of different ways. For instance, an electronic link to the location of the general database may be established or information may be recorded and physically transferred to that location. The communications may occur periodically, on an item-by-item basis, or otherwise.

20 When a customer returns a product with a receipt, a retailer may look at the serial number on the receipt and compare it to the returned product. If the serial numbers match and if all other return conditions for the particular product are met, the return may be accepted. When a customer returns a product with no receipt, or a receipt that does not have a correct serial number, the retailer may

25 search the local database for sale information concerning the specific item being returned. If no sale information is located (for instance if another retailer sold the product), the general database may be accessed and searched for sales

30 information, and the return handled accordingly. Additionally, if the retail clerk is unfamiliar with the applicable return policy, the clerk may submit the product

35 for return approval to obtain the necessary information on the product and make an appropriate determination as to whether the return should be accepted. If the product does not qualify for return, the invention enables the sales clerk to provide other useful information or assistance to the person seeking the return, such as operating or hook-up instructions for the product, as well as information

40 on locations for warranty or non-warranty service for the product.

45 In accordance with yet another aspect of the present invention, a computer system at a product return center location obtains identifying information for a

5 product which is to be returned from a retailer to a manufacturer. In the
10 disclosed example implementation, this identifying information is then
submitted to a remote return approval computer system through the internet or
the like.. The return approval computer system may then utilize the identifying
15 information to determine whether the returned product satisfies applicable return
criteria. If so, the product is pre-approved for return. The product return
location preferably obtains identifying information for a plurality of returned
products at a time. In response to the product identifying information submitted
20 by the product return location, the return approval location may provide a list of
approved returns and unapproved returns, along with a return authorization
25 number for a batch of approved returns. The product return location may then
assemble the approved product returns and ship the batch to the return approval
location (such as the manufacturer). Shipping costs can be saved by omitting
30 rejected product returns from the shipment. The return approval location can
15 handle the approved product returns from the regional return center as a batch,
thereby reducing costs.

35 **BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS**

20 Other objects, features, advantages and characteristics of the present
40 invention will become apparent from the following detailed description of
exemplary embodiments, when read in view of the accompanying drawings, in
which:

45 25 FIGURE 1 is a schematic block diagram illustrating an example of an
overall electronic registration system which may be used in connection with one
50 aspect of the present invention;

5

FIGURE 2 is an example flowchart illustrating a series of steps that may
be performed at a point of sale for registering a product transaction;

10

5 FIGURE 3 illustrates an example transaction receipt which reflects a
unique product serial number and a transaction date;

15

20 FIGURE 4 illustrates an example flow chart for an electronic data
interface between a product retailer and a registration center during electronic
10 product registration;

25

FIGURE 5 illustrates an example flow chart generally illustrating steps
which may be taken in connection with product registration and return;

30

15 FIGURE 6 illustrates an example of a procedure at a retailer for
determining whether a product return is properly under warranty;

35

FIGURE 7 schematically illustrates a typical arrangement which may be
utilized in handling product returns;

20

40 FIGURE 8 is a schematic diagram illustrating components which may be
used in connection with a preferred example implementation of one aspect of the
present invention;

45

25 FIGURE 9 is a data flow diagram illustrating operation of the system of
FIGURE 8;

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5 **FIGURES 10A through 10H illustrate various user interface screen displays which may be used in connection with an example implementation of one aspect of the present invention;**

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15 **FIGURE 11 is a plan view of a pallet on which a plurality of returned goods is stacked for return to a manufacturer, including a batch return authorization label which may be placed on the pallet;**

10

20 **FIGURE 11A further illustrates the batch return authorization label of FIGURE 11;**

20

25 **FIGURES 12, 12A and 12B are schematic diagrams illustrating the operation of a general registration/return system in accordance with one aspect of the present invention; and**

30

15 **FIGURE 13 is a schematic diagram further illustrating the operation of the system of FIGURE 12.**

35

20 **FIGURE 14 is an application overview illustrating various components and functions of a preferred implementation of the central registration computer system.**

40

45 **FIGURE 15 is a flow chart illustrating steps that may be taken to ensure customer protection and verification during submission of additional product registration information as part of a consumer post-sale product registration;**

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5 FIGURES 16A through 16G are example user interface screen displays
which may be used during a customer service request for return/warranty
information;

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FIGURES 17A through 17H are example user interface screen displays
5 which may be used during a customer service request for operating instructions
15 or hook-up information for a product; and

20

FIGURES 18A through 18F are example user interface screen displays
which may be used during a customer service request for vendor/product
information.

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10 **DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF
PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS**

30 The present invention is described in the context of particular exemplary
embodiments. However, it will be recognized by those of ordinary skill that
15 modification, extensions and changes to the disclosed exemplary embodiments
may be made without departing from the true scope and spirit of the instant
35 invention. In short, the following descriptions are provided by way of example
only, and the present invention is not limited to the particular preferred
embodiments disclosed herein.

40

20 An example of one type of electronic product registration system that is
preferably used in connection with the instant invention is illustrated in FIG. 1.
This exemplary electronic registration system is the subject of the two allowed
45 and commonly-owned applications identified above (09/314,023 & 08/725,259).
Briefly, this example system includes a point of sale register 2 and an associated
25 bar code scanner 4. The register 2 is preferably connected with a local computer
system 6 in any suitable manner. For example, the register 2 may be "hard-

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wired" to the local computer system 6. Alternatively, the register 2 and the local computer system 6 may communicate, for example, through modems and telephone lines, or over radio communication channels. Any suitable communication channel may be used.

In certain situations (e.g., single store retailers), it may be advantageous to have the local computer system 6 located in proximity to the register 2. For large chain stores, however, it may be advantageous to situate the local retailer computer 6 at a central location with links to the registers 2 at individual stores. The particular arrangement will depend on the preferences and circumstances of the specific retailer and may vary in accordance therewith.

The local retailer computer system includes an associated local database 8 for storing registration information. Additionally, a local printer 10 and an operator terminal 11 may be provided. The operator terminal may be used, for example, by a store clerk upon return of merchandise to locate pertinent sales information in the local database 8. The printer 10 may be used to produce hard copies of, for example, end-of-day sales reports and/or the like.

In the exemplary embodiment, a communication channel 12 is provided between the retailer computer system 6 and a central computer system 14. The central registration computer system may, for example, be an independent registration center computer system which electronically registers product transactions for a number of different retailers. In other words, the central computer system may be operated by a third-party service provider.

It is noted that the term "communication channel" or "channel" is used herein in its broadest sense, and includes any suitable technique for passing electronic information between systems. Such suitable techniques include, for example, electronic links via modem, radio links, or even communications established by physically transporting a recording medium, such as a magnetic

5 disk, magnetic tape or optical disk, from one system to the other. In the
10 preferred arrangement, an electronic link may be established by modem over
15 available commercial telephone lines.

10 A general registration database 16 is associated with the central
15 registration computer system 14 for storing transaction information from a
20 plurality of retailer computer systems 6. Additionally, a printer 18 and an
operator terminal 20 may be included with the central registration computer
25 system 14. As discussed below in greater detail, the central registration
computer system may maintain a number of data files pertaining to individual
30 retailers, manufactures and the like. These data files include information
applicable to the particular individual retailer, distributor, manufacturer or the
35 like and are preferably maintained by that particular individual or entity. For
example, a data file may contain specific return/warranty policy information
40 applicable to that particular individual or entity.

30 15 It should be appreciated that the central computer system 14 is preferably
intended to handle product registrations for a number of different manufacturers
and/or other vendors. Accordingly, the general registration database may
35 employ a structure wherein the product registrations for each participating
40 vendor is maintained in separate areas. Alternatively, separate databases may be
employed for each participating vendor. Of course, other data structures may be
employed so long as the registration center is able to properly keep track of the
product transaction information.

45 25 As illustrated in FIG. 1, the central registration computer system 14 may
have a number of additional communications links 12', 12'', etc. for receiving
50 25 information from other local computer systems. Thus, for example, a
registration center may receive information from a number of different retailers.
Additionally, the local computer system 6 may include a number of additional

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communication channels 13, 13', 13", etc. for connecting with other central computer systems. Accordingly, an individual retailer can electronically register products with a number of different registration databases, if desired.

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Furthermore, a number of communication channels 15, 15', 15", etc. can be

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5 provided for communications between the central registration computer system 14 and individual manufacturer computer systems and computer systems of third party service providers, law enforcement agencies and/or the like. Of course, a general access channel such as an internet connection may also be made

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available for authorized access to the central computer system 14.

10 For convenience, the multiple communication channels in FIG. 1 are illustrated with separate lines. It should be noted, however, that separate lines 25 are not necessary. For example, the local computer system 6 more likely would have a single communications line, and connection with the particular central computer system 14 would be made through a modem by dialing the appropriate 30 telephone number or through an internet connection.

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An example of the operation of the system illustrated in FIG. 1 is now 35 described in connection with FIGS. 2-6. Referring now to FIG. 2, the electronic registration process begins when a customer brings merchandise to the register 2 for check-out. The sales clerk enters the SKU number which identifies the type 40 of product involved in the transaction (e.g., Super Nintendo Entertainment System, Nintendo Game Boy, Nintendo N64, etc.) by, for example, scanning a UPC product code included on the product packaging (block 100). Of course, key entry or another technique for entering the SKU number may be used.

45

Electronic registration might not be necessary for a substantial number of 50 small commodity products (e.g., batteries, candy, diapers, etc.) that are commonly sold by retailers. Accordingly, a check may be made, based on the type of product as identified by the UPC code, to determine whether this is a

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product for which electronic registration is desired (block 102). If so, the store associate is prompted to enter the serial number of the individual item (block 104).

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The serial number may be entered (block 106), for example, by scanning a serial number printed on the packaging. Alternatively, the serial number as it appears on the product may be scanned through a window in the packaging. This alternative ensures that the individual product is identified even if it is mispackaged. Also, repackaging of returned merchandise would be simplified. Other techniques, such as key entry, may also be used. Because the serial number is unique to each individual product, it acts as individual production identification information.

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Once the serial number is entered, a check may be made to ensure that the serial number is valid (block 108). If not, control returns to block 104, and the store associate is again prompted to enter the serial number. This is repeated until a valid serial number is obtained. It may be desirable to provide store managers with the ability to override the requirement to enter a serial number in a limited number of situations. If such an ability is given, however, the overrides should be monitored to ensure the ability is not abused. This may be done, for example, by generating a periodic report listing all overrides by individual managers.

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Several different techniques may be used to evaluate and verify the validity of the serial number. Of course, to safeguard against fraud, individual manufacturers will likely each use its own confidential technique for verifying the validity of the serial number. Accordingly, the retailer system preferably includes the ability to select and apply an appropriate verification technique in accordance with the particular manufacturer, product line, or the like.

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In one preferred technique, a check digit is added to the serial number.

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Such a check digit technique may utilize a predetermined mathematical operation which is performed on the digits of the serial number. If the result of the predetermined mathematical operation is equal to the check digit, the validity 5 of the serial number is verified.

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An example of a check digit technique will be described in connection with an eight-digit serial number. A predetermined mathematical operation associated with the check digit may be to multiply the sum of the first four digits of the serial number by two (2), multiply the sum of the last four digits by three 20 (3), and sum the resulting products. This may be expressed in equation form as:

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$$2(N_1+N_2+N_3+N_4) + 3(N_5+N_6+N_7+N_8)$$

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where N_1 is the first digit of the serial number, N_2 is the second digit of the serial 15 number, and so on. The check digit may then be taken as the least significant digit of the result. Thus, for a serial number 22312313, the result of the predetermined mathematical operation is $2*(2+2+3+1) + 3*(2+3+1+3) = 16+27$ 35 $=43$. The check digit is the least significant digit; that is the check digit is 3. Accordingly, the number appearing on the product would be 223123133, 40 wherein the last digit is the check digit. For serial number 10532641, the check digit is 7 [$2*(1+0+5+3) + 3*(2+6+4+1) = 18+39=57$], and the number appearing on the product would be 105326417.

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The particular mathematical operation used in connection with the check digit is not critical to the present invention. Any predetermined mathematical 25 operation may be used to obtain the check digit. Indeed, for added security, it is possible to utilize more than one check digit, wherein each check digit is 50 calculated by a different mathematical operation. Whatever mathematical

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operation is used, however, it is desirable to minimize the number of individuals with knowledge of the specific operation to reduce the risk of false serial numbers being generated.

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In a preferred embodiment of the instant invention a serial number mask and check digit system may be defined by the third-party service provider for use by the individual manufacturers participating in the electronic registration system (ERS). This feature provides an improved method of defining serial numbers for each Universal Product Code (UPC), which method improves the efficiency and accuracy of ERS systems and/or other systems in which such information is utilized. This system enables significant flexibility for the manufacturers in assigning serial numbers, while also assuring that the serial numbers can be efficiently and accurately captured during the purchase transaction for use by an ERS.

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In accordance with this mask system, a number of mandatory rules are defined for use by the participating manufacturers when defining serial numbers for their products. An example set of rules is provided below:

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- 1) A serial number consists of three parts: Constants, numeric variables, and a check digit. The Constants and check digit are optional. Only the numeric variables are required.
- 2) Serial number constants, variables and check digit must maintain positional integrity.
- 3) The check digit must be at the end of the serial number.
- 4) The value of the check digit is calculated from one contiguous range.
- 5) If a UPC or item number has more than one mask, all character constants must be the same for each mask and in the same position, unless a numeric constant is defined that is unique between each mask.
- 6) All Constants are defined with upper case letters, or numbers.
- 7) Constants can either be characters or numbers.
- 8) All variables are defined with a lower case "x".
- 9) The check digit is defined with a lower case "y".
- 10) Variables can only be numbers.

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- 11) The check digit can only be a single number from 0 to 9.
- 12) In the event that the bar code contains more than just the serial number,

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- 13) If more than one contiguous range of variables exists in the mask, only one range can be used to calculate the minimum value allowed for registration.
- 14). The range of variables used for minimum value allowed for registration,

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- 15) In this example, a mask for a serial number can consist of three parts: Constants (optional), variables (required), and a check digit (optional). Below is an example of a serial number and how it is defined in the mask.

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Example serial number: NS123456784

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- The constants are defined as "NS" in position 1 and 2.
- The variables are defined as lower case "x" in positions 3 through 10.
- The check digit is defined as a lower case "y" in position 11.

20) Thus, the mask would look like: NSxxxxxxxy

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A check digit algorithm may also be used in this embodiment as follows:

The following six arguments need to be answered to define how the check digit is calculated. Note that these arguments are only answered when a check digit is

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placed in the mask.

Example: NS123456784

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1) Starting position of the range used to calculate the check digit. (3)

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2) Ending position of the range used to calculate the check digit. (10)

45) 3) Directional as Left to Right, or Right to Left (R-L)

When taking the example 12345678, and trying to determine which numbers are 35) in an even position, and which numbers are in an odd position, this tells the algorithm which direction to start from. In this case, the direction is from right to left. Thus all odd position numbers are 8, 6, 4, and 2. All even position numbers are 7, 5, 3 and 1.

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4) Multiplier of odd or even positioned numbers. (3)

In the example above, the multiplier chosen is 3. This is a number that can range from 1 to 9, and is set by the client (e.g. manufacturer).

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5) Multiply on all odd positions or even positions (O). See argument 3. In the example above, the odd position numbers are multiplied by 3. This is also decided by the client (e.g. manufacturer).

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10 6) Reduce single multiplier. (N)

When multiplying the positional numbers by the multiplier 3, there are two ways that you can perform the multiplication. You can multiply the sum of all the numbers by 3, or you may want to multiply each number by 3, and reduce the value to a single digit. See below for each technique. For our example serial

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15 number, option "a" will be used.

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a). $8 + 6 + 4 + 2 = 20 \cdot 3 = 60$

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	Multiply	Reduce
b).	$8 \cdot 3 = 24$	$2 + 4 = 6$
	$6 \cdot 3 = 18$	$1 + 8 = 9$
	$4 \cdot 3 = 12$	$1 + 2 = 3$
	$2 \cdot 3 = 6$	(no reduction needed)

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6 + 9 + 3 + 6 = 24

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Notice with option a, the value is 60, but with option b the value is 27.

Each option will produce a different result. For this example serial number, option a will be used.

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When each of the six arguments are answered, the definition is stored in the following notation:

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3,10,R-L,3,O,N

35 Therefore, the value of the check digit is calculated as follows:

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- ODD POSITIONS
- EVEN POSITIONS

$8 + 6 + 4 + 2 = 20 \cdot 3 = 60$

$7 + 5 + 3 + 1 = 16$

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- SUM OF RESULTS $16 + 60 = 76$
- LAST DIGIT OF RESULT
SUBTRACTED FROM 10 (I.E., Mod 10) $10 - 6 = 4$

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- 5 The check digit value based on the above definition would be 4.

So for the example NS123456784;
Mask = NSxxxxxxxxxy

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- 10 Check Digit Algorithm = 3,10,R-L,3,O,N

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If the range for the check digit algorithm contains character constants, a conversion table is used. If the range of data used to calculate the serial number does not have any alpha characters, then a conversion table does not have to be assigned. An example conversion table is as follow:

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A=1, B=2, C=3, D=4, E=5, F=6, G=7, H=8, I=9, J=10, K=11, L=12,
M=13, N=14, O=15, P=0, Q=1, R=2, S=3, T=4, U=5, V=6, W=7, X=8,
Y=9, Z=10

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20 This example corresponds to what the U.S. postal service uses for converting characters to numbers. This conversion table is then provided to, for example, the retailers so that the POS system can edit the data scanned prior to accepting the value. The conversion table may also be used at the location where the ERS database is located to edit the data prior to registration in the database.

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45 This feature of the instant invention provides an advantageous method of enabling participating manufacturers to assign a serial number mask for each UPC, while also enabling the serial numbers used to be easily captured during a product transaction for input to an electronic registration system (ERS) or the like. The POS system would then have access to information which would enable it to know what mask to use for each UPS, thereby enabling the correct

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serial number to be obtained and verified during the product purchase transaction.

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In accordance with another aspect of the invention, the mask may be defined in a manner which enables the system (ERS system, POS system, or other related system) to determine if the mask is a packaging mask or a product mask. A packaging mask is defined as a mask for serial numbers used only on packaging for products, while a product mask is defined as a mask for serial numbers used only on actual products. One example embodiment of this feature of the invention is to define certain elements (such as certain constants) in the mask to be used only with serial numbers on product packaging, and to define different constants for use only with serial numbers on actual products. In this manner, the POS or ERS system could determine upon reading the serial number whether the actual product or only the product packaging has been scanned or otherwise obtained.

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One benefit of this optional feature of the invention, is that fraudulent returns can be minimized or prevented. More particularly, by using this technique the fraudulent return situation can be avoided where a person purchases a new product with new packaging and then returns the new packaging with an old or different product therein for credit or refund. The invention reduces this type of fraud by requiring that an actual product be scanned, rather than only the packaging returned with the product. In other words the POS or ERS system could be programmed to recognize during a product return transaction whether only the packaging serial number has been scanned, and prevent acceptance of the return until the actual product is scanned, thereby assuring that the actual product, not just the packaging, qualifies for return.

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Once the serial number is verified (block 108), a local database may be updated with the serial number information and any other necessary or desired information (block 110). At minimum, however, the local database should include an indication of the date on which the transaction took place. Other information might include the price paid, the store associate responsible for the sale, and the like.

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The serial number of the individual product is printed (block 112) as part of a written customer transaction receipt. As shown in the sample sales receipt 30 of FIG. 3, the serial number may be printed adjacent the description and SKU number of the registered product. Thus, it will be a simple matter to correlate serial numbers with associated products, particularly when several registered products appear on a single customer sales receipt. Of course, additional information may be printed as well.

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The date of the transaction will typically be printed at either the beginning or the end of the sales receipt, but may appear anywhere on the receipt. In the example operation illustrated in FIG. 2 and the sample sales receipt of FIG. 3, the date is printed at the end of the sales receipt 30 (block 116). For ease of viewing, the serial number and date on the sample receipt 30 are indicated by boxes. If desired, an actual printed receipt may also have such information highlighted, for example, by a different color ink.

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Turning back to the example operation illustrated in FIG. 2, after the serial number is printed, a check is made to determine whether sales are complete (block 114). Ordinarily, this will be based on the store associate hitting a TOTAL button on the cash register. If sales are not complete, control returns to block 100 for entry of a SKU number for the next product. Otherwise, sales totals are calculated and printed on the receipt along with the current date (block

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116). Thereafter, the central registration computer system 14 is contacted and the general registration database 16 is updated.

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It should be emphasized that the operation illustrated in FIG. 2 is merely exemplary, and that the steps need not be performed in the particular order

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5 shown. For example, all print operations and database updates can take place after sales are completed. Additionally, it is not necessary to update the databases on an item-by-item basis. Indeed, efficiency and speed in updating the general database may be increased by batching transactions in groups of, for example, fifteen transactions.

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10 An example technique for interfacing the local computer system 6 to the central registration computer system 14 is illustrated in FIG. 4. Product serial numbers are scanned or keyed in by a store associate (block 200) and stored with associated information in the local database (block 202) using an operation such as discussed in connection with FIG. 2. Thereafter, the local computer system 6 extracts the serial number information from the database (block 204) and batches the information in blocks of fifteen (block 206). The information may also be batched by manufacturer in the local computer system 6. The operations represented by blocks 204 and 206 are preferably performed periodically, for example, daily.

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20 Once the serial number information is properly batched (block 206), the local computer system 6, in this case a retailer system, dials the general registration computer system 14, to make an electronic link to an electronic mailbox set up for that particular retailer (block 208). A separate electronic mailbox may be set up for each registration center account. The connection is tested (block 210) and, if the connection is not properly established, the retailer computer system 6 redials (block 212) until a proper connection is established. At that point, data is transmitted (block 214) to the electronic mailbox. Batching

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the information increases transmission speed and, therefore, reduces data transmission times.

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- Data communications between the retailer system and the registration center system may use a conventional communications format. For example, the computer systems may be equipped with an EDI Translator capable of using the Standard 140 file format established by the EIA. The Standard 140 file format is specifically designed to extract product registration information. A typical transmission would begin with a Transaction Set Header to indicate the start of a transaction and to assign a control number. This would be followed by a
- 10 Beginning Segment for Product Registration which indicates the beginning of a product registration transaction set and transmits identifying numbers, dates and times. The identifying numbers may include a Purpose Code to identify the type of registration (e.g., original sale or return to stock) and a Reference Number assigned by the user for the particular transaction. Next, a Name segment is
- 25 transmitted to identify the user by type of organization, name and identifier code. The identifier code may indicate an organizational entity, a physical location, or an individual.

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- If desired, additional identifying segments such as an Address Information segment and a Geographic Location segment may be transmitted. The address information would include, for example, a street number and name for the individual store. The geographic location information would include the city name, a state or province code as defined by an appropriate Government agency, a postal code (e.g., a zip code in the United States), and a country code.

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- 45 Following any desired additional identifying segments, specific item identification information (e.g., serial numbers) may be transmitted along with a textual description of the product if desired. Information identifying the
- 50 individual store that sold the particular item may be associated with the

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information for that item. Appropriate dividers would be provided to separate the information for the respective individual items. After the individual item information has been transmitted completely, a Transaction Set Trailer segment may be transmitted to indicate the end of the transaction set and provide the count of transmitted segments.

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Returning now to FIG. 4, the registration center computer system 14 decodes the serial number information received from the retailer (block 216).

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The decoded serial number information is preferably sorted by manufacturer (if not already sorted) and initially stored in a temporary database (block 218).

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10 Separate temporary databases may be employed for individual manufacturers. The serial number information is preferably encoded along with the retailer's name, the registration date, the sale date, the last date on which returns will be accepted, and the last date for warranty repairs (block 220).

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15 The applicable return and warranty dates may be stored in the registration center computer system or, alternatively, could be obtained from the particular manufacturer by way of communication channels 15, 15', 15", etc. Of course, other ways of determining the appropriate dates may also be utilized. In 35 accordance with the preferred embodiment, however, the central computer system has access to information providing the manufacturers return and 20 warranty policy for each product registered, and the participating manufacturer or other vendor provides and updates this information for each of its products.

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45 The individual serial numbers may next be validated using the check digit technique discussed above, and the data is transferred to the registration center's general database (block 222). Following validation of the serial numbers, an on-line summary report may be generated which lists all accepted and rejected serial 25 numbers (block 224). The valid data is then stored in the manufacturer's national 50 serial number database for later access as described in detail below.

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5 The summary report provided in block 224 provides a tool for the
registration center to locate trouble spots caused, for instance, by malfunctioning
10 retailer systems or attempted fraud. Additional monitoring reports may also be
generated as desired. For example, the serial number pass/fail ratio for all
15 5 returns by a particular retailer over a given time period may be reported,
duplicate serial numbers may be located and listed, previously registered serial
numbers may be flagged, and cross-references may be made between the
registration date and the date the product was returned to the manufacturer.
20 Such reports can be used by the registration center to monitor retailer returns for
10 possible problems or abuse. Reports may also be generated for individual
manufacturers for separate monitoring or other uses.

25 FIG. 5A and 5B illustrate in flow chart form an example purchase and
return process made possible by the electronic registration system described
above in accordance with the present invention. A store customer first picks out
30 15 a store product for purchase (block 300) and brings it to the check out station
(block 302). The store associate then scans the UPC code to enter the product
SKU number (block 304) and, if it is a product for which electronic registration
35 30 is sought, the store clerk is prompted to enter the unique serial number (block
306).

40 20 After the store clerk scans the serial number (block 308), the customer
sales receipt is printed with the serial number (block 310) and the transaction
databases are updated (block 312). The process ends if the customer is satisfied
45 with the product (block 314). If not, however, the customer returns the product
to the store (block 316).

50 25 As noted previously, if the customer presents the sales receipt at the time
of a return, the store associate may compare the serial number on the product
with that on the sales receipt. The associate should compare the printed serial

5 number with that on the product itself, rather than the serial number on the
10 packaging, to guard against repackaging of an old product in a box for a recently
15 purchased product. If the serial numbers match, the return is within an
applicable allowable time period, and all other return qualifications are met (e.g.,
no major parts are missing, etc.) the return may be accepted, assuming that the
store clerk handling the return known the applicable return policy associated
with that particular product.

20 However, if the store clerk is uncertain of the applicable allowable return
period, the clerk may submit the product for electronic return verification as
25 described below.

30 If there is no receipt, or if the product serial number does not match that
printed on the receipt, the store associate examines the products to ensure all
35 return qualifications are met (block 318). If so, the store associate scans the
serial number on the product (block 320) and the retailer computer system
40 checks the retailer database for the serial number (block 322). A link to the
registration center's serial number database may be made to search for serial
45 numbers which do not appear in the retailer database (block 324).

50 Assuming the serial number information is found in either the retailer
database or the registration center database, the date of purchase is checked to
see if then return has been presented within the applicable return period (e.g. 90
days) (block 326). Purchases within the applicable return period which meet all
other manufacturer return qualifications (block 328) may be refunded or
exchanged (block 330). The retailer may then return the product to the
manufacturer within an applicable time period (e.g., 150 days) from the date of
55 purchase to receive credit for the return (block 332).

For products which do not meet all manufacturer return qualifications
(block 328), but were purchased within the applicable return period (block 326),

5 the consumer may be referred to an authorized repair facility for a warranty
10 repair (block 334). Similarly, if the purchase was made outside the applicable
15 return period (block 326), but within the applicable warranty repair period (e.g.,
20 180 days) (block 336), the customer will be referred to an authorized repair
25 facility for a warranty repair (block 334). Consumers seeking to return products
30 purchased beyond the applicable warranty repair period (block 336) will be
35 directed to an authorized repair facility for a non-warranty repair (block 338).

The example return and warranty repair deadlines noted in the example of
20 FIG. 5 are fairly typical for actual return policies. However, these particular
10 deadlines are merely examples, and other appropriate deadlines may be used
25 without departing from the invention. Because different manufacturers may
30 utilize different return and warranty deadlines, it is preferred that the deadlines
35 applicable to a particular manufacturer be stored in the retailer computer system.
Of course, if the applicable deadlines are encoded along with the serial number
40 information at the time of initial registration, that information should be
45 available from the registration data without the need to again check the
applicable return criteria.

FIG. 6 provides a graphic illustration of a return process which utilizes
35 the features of an electronic registration system in accordance with the instant
40 invention. As illustrated at the left hand portion of FIG. 6, when a customer
45 seeks to return a product, the store associate searches the retailer's store-wide
50 database by entering the product serial number. If the transaction is located in
55 the store-wide database, the operator terminal 11 of the retailer computer system
6 displays the product description, the purchase location, and purchase date.
Additionally, the consumer's return options for the particular manufacturer (e.g.,
55 warranty repair, exchange, store credit, or cash refund) may be displayed. The
display of consumer options is particularly advantageous where electronic

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registration is used for multiple manufacturers. By displaying the options, the need for the store clerk to remember or look up the options is avoided. Also, the likelihood of the store associate making a mistake is reduced.

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The right hand portion of FIG. 6 illustrates a situation where the product was purchased from a competitor retailer and, thus, does not appear in the store-wide database. After unsuccessfully searching the store-wide database, the retailer computer system 6 dials up to search the registration center database.

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The registration center computer system 14 returns the date purchased, the name of the retailer that sold the product, the applicable deadline for consumer returns,

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the applicable deadline for the retailer to return the product to the manufacturer for credit, and the applicable deadline for warranty repairs. Based on this information from the registration center, the operator terminal 11 of the retailer computer system 6 displays the product description, the purchase location and date, and available consumer options.

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Referring now to FIG. 7, an example of a typical arrangement which may

be used for handling product returns is illustrated. The present invention, of course, is applicable to other arrangements as well. In the example arrangement of FIG. 7, a regional warehouse 501 operated by a large retail chain collects product returns from local retail stores 503A and 503B. In the illustrated

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example, retail store 503A is located in the Northeast United States and retail store 503B serves the Mid-Atlantic region; the retailer regional return center warehouse 501 is located in the South; and the manufacturer warehouse 505 is in the Pacific Northwest. Of course, this example is for illustrative purposes only, and it should be appreciated that other local retail stores, regional return centers, etc. would be present in an actual return network. Also, it should be understood that a product return network typically would be operated in conjunction with a product distribution network.

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After the returned products arrive at the regional warehouse 501, they are sorted by manufacturer and/or product, and are shipped from the regional warehouse 501 to the manufacturer warehouse 505 for credit or replacement.

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The manufacturer then inspects the returned products to ensure that they comply with necessary return conditions and, if appropriate, issues a credit or replacement product.

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Each step of the foregoing example return process involves various processing and handling requirements. For example, personnel at the local retail store must first review the product for compliance with applicable return requirements (e.g., ensure that the product is returned within the specified return period and verify that all parts have been returned), and then arrange for shipment to the appropriate regional warehouse by way of a truck 507 or other suitable means of transportation.

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Employees at the regional warehouse must unload the products received from the local retail stores, sort them by manufacturer and/or product, prepare them for shipment (e.g., place the returned products on shipping pallets), and arrange for the shipment to the manufacturer. Finally, the manufacturer must receive the returned product shipment, verify that the returns are proper, repackage the returned products if appropriate, and conduct necessary bookkeeping to ensure that the retailer receives proper credit for the return. It is noted that the foregoing is not an exhaustive list of the costs and efforts associated with processing product returns by the retail stores, the regional return center warehouses, and the manufacturers.

25

The electronic registration system (ERS) described above may be utilized, for example, in connection with operations at the retailer regional return center warehouse 501 to reduce costs incurred by both the return center and the manufacturer. In accordance with one aspect of the present invention,

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significant cost savings can be realized by reducing or eliminating unnecessary shipping costs by making a relatively early determination whether a product return will ultimately be accepted by the manufacturer or the like. If not, the returned product need not be handled further, thereby reducing costs.

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Thus, ERS can be used to reduce costs and improve efficiency of returns between the retailer and manufacturer and also, as described in greater detail below, between the consumer and the retailer. As explained herein, the user interface as well as the operation of the ERS system is significantly different in the retail/manufacturer application as compared to the consumer/retailer application, as a result of the particular needs in each of these return situations. It is noted that commonly owned and co-pending application Serial No. 09/065,552 identified above, includes, as one example, a method and apparatus for efficiently handling product return transactions between a retailer and a manufacturer. In order to provide a complete understanding of the preferred ERS system used in the present invention, a further description of this retailer/manufacturer returns system is described below.

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In accordance with this feature of the ERS system, advanced return authorization for shipment of returned products between the retailer and the manufacturer can be obtained for a plurality of products at one time to establish an approved product return batch. The approved batch may be properly labeled prior to return to the manufacturer. In this way, product returns may be easily and efficiently handled in batches rather than as individual units, thereby improving efficiency and reducing costs.

Referring now to FIG. 8, an example implementation of this system includes a return side portion 521 and a manufacturer side portion 523 which are operable to communicate over, for example, an internet connection 525. Briefly, the return side portion 521 may include a personal computer 5210 that includes,

5 for example, an Intel 486 processor or higher with at least 16 MB of RAM, a
10 Microsoft Windows 95 or Windows NT operating system, and browser software
such as Netscape Navigator 4.0 or higher. The personal computer 5210 may
also include a modem for direct connection to an internet provider through a
15 dedicated telephone connection 5212. Alternatively, an internet connection may
be made by the personal computer 5210 over a corporate network. Also, it may
be possible to utilize a direct telephone link by modem between the return side
portion 521 and the manufacturer side portion 523 or even a hardwired
20 connection.

25 10 A bar code scanner 5214 is provided for scanning bar coded SKU and,
possibly, serial numbers for returned products. Additionally, a printer 5216 is
provided for printing transaction records and, if desired, printed versions of
return authorizations from the manufacturer. As will be discussed below in
30 greater detail, manually prepared return authorization forms may be used as an
alternative to printed return authorizations.

35 15 The manufacturer side portion 521 includes a computer system 5230
utilizing, for example, an IBM AS/400 computer and having an associated data
storage unit 5234 for storing an electronic product registration database. The
manufacturer side computer system 5230 is capable of communicating with the
20 return side portion 521 over an internet connection though telephone connection
5232. As noted previously, other communication techniques between the
40 manufacturer side portion 523 and the return side portion 521 may also be
utilized.

45 25 After the regional retailer return facility receives products for return to the
manufacturer, the return side portion 521 may access the manufacturer side
portion 523 to screen the products for compliance with return requirements and
50 to obtain pre-authorization of the returns. In particular, the return side computer

5 5210 connects to the manufacturer side computer 5230 by way of the internet or
through other appropriate communication techniques. In the present example
10 embodiment, the manufacturer side computer maintains a world wide web page
for access by the regional return center. Password protection may be provided to
5 ensure only authorized retailers are able to access return pre-authorization
features in accordance with the present invention. For example, each return
15 center location that is permitted access to the pre-authorization features may be
assigned a location identification code and a password. In such a case, both the
location identification code and the password would be required before access is
20 granted to the product return screening program.

10 FIG. 9 is a logic flow chart for the manufacturer side computer 5230 in
screening returned products and processing pre-authorization requests from the
25 regional return center. As indicated in the top portion of FIG. 9, the user first
enters the appropriate location identification code and password. FIG. 10A
30 15 illustrates a screen which may be displayed at the return side computer to prompt
the user to enter the location identification and password. Once this information
is received by the manufacturer side computer, the password is validated at
35 function block 5302. If desired, appropriate application maintenance procedures
may be implemented upon validation of the password.

40 20 Upon verification of the location identification code and the password, the
manufacturer side computer 5230 may cause a screen such as is illustrated in
FIG. 10B to be displayed at the return side computer 5210. As shown in FIG.
45 10B, existing batches saved in memory at the manufacturer side computer 5230
are listed. Existing batches are those for which return products have been
scanned, but which have not yet been submitted for return authorization.
50 25 Preferably, items can only be added or deleted from a batch up to the time that
the batch is submitted for return authorization. In the present example

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implementation of the invention, once the batch is submitted for return authorization, it will no longer be displayed on the batch status screen, but can be viewed from the RA Status screen described below in connection with FIG. 10H.

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It is possible to display a number of information items on the batch status screen in addition to the batch number. For example, the batch status screen shown in FIG. 10B displays the date and time the batch was opened, the total number of products that have been screened for return validation, the number of accepted items, and the number of rejected items. Of course, additional information could be displayed if desired.

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A number of options are offered to the return center operator on the batch status screen illustrated in FIG. 10B. In particular, the return center operator may open an existing batch, create a new batch, or submit a batch to the manufacturer for return authorization. To open an existing batch, the desired batch may be selected in a conventional fashion by using a mouse to highlight the batch number and then clicking on the "Open Batch" button. Similarly, a highlighted batch may be submitted for return authorization by clicking the "Submit RA" button. A new batch can be created by clicking the "New Batch" button.

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Preferably, a batch must be set up prior to screening returned products for return authorization. Depending on user preference, the return center operator may establish a new batch for each pallet of returned products that is screened for return authorization, each bill of lading, or based on the date that the products are scanned. It is not necessary to limit the number of products that can be scanned for each batch.

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Referring again to FIG. 9, when the return center operator either opens an existing batch or creates a new batch, control passes to function block 5304. For

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5 a new batch, the manufacturer side computer 5230 creates a batch header which
includes information identifying the assigned batch number, any customer
10 reference numbers, the return center address, the name and telephone number of
a customer contact person, and the status of the batch (e.g., product entry stage,
5 pending approval, approved, declined, RA assigned, etc.). A new batch number
will be assigned each time "New Batch" is selected. If an existing batch is
15 opened, the header information is retrieved from memory associated with the
manufacturer side computer 5230.

20 Once a batch is opened, the system is now ready to screen returned
10 products. Depending on the type of product for which return authorization is
sought, the return center operator selects either "Scan Hardware" or "Scan
25 Accessories" by clicking the appropriate button (FIG. 10B).

Referring now to FIG. 10C, to screen hardware product returns for
compliance with return criteria, the return center operator is prompted to enter
30 the Universal Product Code (UPC) number for the product, the product serial
number, and a store reference code (if desired). This information may be entered
by scanning bar codes on the product with wedge scanner 5214 (FIGURE 8), or
35 alternatively by typing the information on the keyboard associated with return
side computer 5210. Other appropriate techniques may be employed as well.
40 The user may then click the "Validate" button to instruct the manufacturer side
computer 5230 to screen the product for return approval.

As shown in FIG. 10C, the Scan Hardware screen then displays the
submitted information including the UPC code, the serial number, a description
45 of the product, the date and time it was entered, and the store reference if any.
25 Again, other items could be displayed if desired.

50 Although various techniques may be used for validating the screened
products for compliance with return criteria, the system preferably uses data

5 collected by an ERS as described above. In other words, while the above
description of this retailer/manufacturer return system indicates that the
10 manufacturer has a product registration database, this database may be based on
information collected by the central database of multi-vendor ERS system as
5 described above. Briefly, such an electronic registration system establishes a
database which then may be accessed at the time of product return to determine
15 the date of original sale and other information pertinent to determining whether
return requirements are met. It is noted that, for a return to be properly accepted
by a manufacturer, the product must not only be returned by the customer to the
20 retailer within the specified return period, but it also must be returned by the
retailer to the manufacturer within this specified period. Thus, this
25 retailer/manufacturer feature of the ERS system is used to verify the latter.

When the manufacturer side computer 5230 receives UPC and serial
number information for return validation, control passes to function block 5306
30 of FIG. 9. The manufacturer side computer 5230 then checks the electronic
registration database to ensure that the identified product meets product return
35 criteria, and posts the scanned information to a batch detail file. The batch detail
file preferably includes the UPC number, the serial number, an indication of
product quantity, and status (e.g., pending approval, approval good, error, or
40 approval declined). The electronic registration database may then be edited to
indicate that the product identified by the UPC code (function block 5308) and
serial number (function block 5310) has been screened for return. Accordingly,
45 the manufacturer side computer 5230 can keep track of products that have
already been screened to avoid multiple submissions of a single product for
50 return.

There may be a number of reasons a product will not qualify for return
55 credit or replacement. For example, the warranty period may have expired, the

5 serial number might not have been registered, an invalid serial number may have
been received, the packaging may be missing, a major component of the product
may be missing, or the item might be non-returnable as part of the conditions of
10 sale. If the product does not qualify for return, the return center, such as the
5 retailer regional warehouse, can retain the rejected product rather than ship it to
the manufacturer, thereby saving the cost of freight for shipping a product that
15 does not qualify for credit.

A note is displayed across the bottom of the screen of the Scan Hardware
20 screen when a hardware unit does not qualify for return. The displayed message
10 is preferably for the last item scanned. If the return center operator would like to
review the reason a previously scanned item did not qualify for return credit, the
operator may select "Actions" from the screen menu to see a list of available
25 options. The operator may then select "Reasons" to see a description of the
reason the unit was rejected. An example of a displayed reject reason is shown if
30 FIG. 10D. Scanning may be resumed by pressing the <Esc> key on the return
side computer keyboard to close the menu screen. The scanning process is
repeated for each hardware item for which screening is sought.

Ideally, the return center operator stacks returnable items 1103 qualifying
35 for return on a shipping pallet 1101 or the like (see FIG. 11). Non-qualifying
20 items should be stacked on a separate pallet. It will then be unnecessary for
40 return center personnel to later sort through the products a second time to
separate qualifying products from non-qualifying products.

The Scan Accessories display screen is illustrated in FIG. 10E. The return
45 center operator is prompted to enter the quantity of the accessory that is to be
25 scanned. For example, if return authorization is to be requested for three VHS
cables, the operator will input "3" and then use the <TAB> button on the return
50 side computer keyboard to advance the cursor to the UPC Number field. The

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UPC number may then be scanned or entered manually on the keyboard. If a Store Reference code is used it may be entered prior to clicking the "Validate" button.

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Once pre-screening is completed for the hardware and accessories, the return center operator may move back to the "Batch Status" screen. The batch may then be submitted for return authorization by clicking the "Submit RA" button. Referring now to FIG. 10F, the return center operator is preferably prompted to enter the name and phone number of the person who should be contacted with information or questions concerning the return authorization request. If desired, a customer reference number (e.g., a bill of lading number, file number, invoice number, etc.) may be entered for an internal reference to identify the return authorization. If the information on the screen is not filled in or "Cancel" is selected, the batch will not be submitted for return authorization. However, the batch will continue to be visible from the "Batch Status" screen.

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Referring again to FIG. 9, control goes to function block 5312 upon submission of a return authorization request. First, the return center operator is asked to verify the contact information. An example of an appropriate contact verification screen for display on the return side computer 5210 is shown in FIG. 10G. If the contact information is verified, the manufacturer side computer 5230 re-validates the good scans included in the submitted batch. Control then proceeds to function block 5314. If the good scans fail re-validation, control proceeds to function block 5316, which flags the batch header with an error indication, and notifies the return center operator of the failure. Otherwise, control proceeds to function block 5318 for automated approval.

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Function block 5320 checks to determine whether the automated approval process was successful. If not, an e-mail message may be sent to a manufacturer's representative for the particular return center (function block

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5322). The return authorization request may then be reviewed manually to determine whether the request should be approved (function block 5324). If the manual review shows that the request was properly rejected, the batch is flagged with an indication that the request was rejected, and the return center is notified 10 of the rejection (function block 5326). However, if the request is approved, 15 control passes to function block 5328 to create a return authorization number and update the batch header to indicate the approved status. As indicated in FIG. 9, control may also pass to function block 5328 by way of function block 5320 if the automated approval process is successful.

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10 FIG. 10H illustrates an example of an RA Status display screen which may be used to inform the return center operator of the status of a return 25 authorization (RA) request. As shown, the RA Status screen lists the authorization status (e.g., pending, approved, rejected), the batch number, the customer reference number if any, the number of scans in the batch, the 30 submission date, the approval date if applicable, the RA number if applicable, and the expiration date by which the return must be completed.

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Once the RA has been submitted and approved, the system may also provide the dollar value of the product that is authorized for return. This dollar 40 value may be based on the lower of (1) the gross invoice price paid by the Dealer 20 for the product, less the value of all allowances and incentives given to the Dealer, or (2) the vendor's net product pricing at the time of the return. In most cases, the dealer may deduct the monetary value of authorized returns from any 45 existing or future vendor invoices. Additionally, the system can be configured to comply with a vendor's specific returns policy and guidelines.

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25 The RA number should be placed on the products prior to shipping to the manufacturer for credit. Referring now to FIG. 11 and 11A, the RA number 50 listed on the RA Status display screen may be written on an adhesive label 1105

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supplied by the manufacturer along with the customer reference number (if applicable). Alternatively, the printer 5216 (FIGURE 8) may be used to print labels upon receipt of a return authorization number. Such labels are preferably placed on all four sides of the shipping pallet, the pallet is shrink wrapped and shipped to the manufacturer. The pallet should be shipped immediately to guard against expiration of product return dates. Of course, other shipping containers may be used as well.

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The return authorization labels 1105 provide an easy reference to personnel at the manufacturer warehouse and permit simple and efficient processing of the returned. Because the returned products are received in a batch and have been pre-approved for return credit, less work is required in reviewing the returned products to verify compliance with return criteria. As a result, the resources required to process the shipment are reduced, and the manufacturer is able to more quickly credit the return center for the returned products.

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As explained above, this exemplary retailer/manufacturer returns feature of the ERS system simplifies and improves the returns process between a retailer and a manufacturer. The instant invention, however, is particularly advantageous when used at the consumer/retail level to prevent acceptance of unauthorized returns to retailers by consumers. This retailer/consumer feature of the instant invention will now be described in greater detail below.

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Referring now to FIGS. 12, 12A, 12B and 13, in accordance with one aspect of the present invention, a computer based system provides a method for real-time data storage and retrieval for the purpose of verifying and validating specific sales transaction data and product returns/warranty repair eligibility at the point of sale (POS) or retail location at which the consumer brings the product for return. Sales transaction information provided by this system may include SKU or UPC number, product serial number, date of purchase, place of

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purchase, register transaction number, payment information, return-to-vendor status, repair warranty status, authorized repair center location and phone number, estimated distance from consumer to repair location, repair prices, and any other suitable information as desired by the retailer and/or vendor.

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5 The sales and returns verification system illustrated in FIGS. 12, 12A, 12B and 13, preferably makes use of and incorporates POS electronic registration technology at the point of sale register, where the product's SKU (stock keeping unit) or UPC (universal product code) is linked to the product's serial number, forming a unique identifier. Additional point of sale data (as determined by the 15 retailer and/or vendor) can now be attached to this unique identifier and stored and/or transmitted and stored in a central database for future reference. Once the 20 connection is made between the retailer and the vendor or third party service provider additional services, such as credit card authorization or check verification, can be provided to the retailer.

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25 In operation, the POS register may capture the UPC or SKU and the product's serial number to establish a unique identifier. Depending on the requirements of the particular retailer and/or vendor, additional data may be linked to the unique identifier and then transmitted. As explained above, the 30 unique identifier may be determined in accordance with a mask and associated decoding information defined, for example, by the third party service provider and manufacturer.

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45 If a transaction is paid by check or credit card, the check or credit card identification number may trigger the system to establish a connection with the third party service provider for credit card authorization or check verification.

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25 Once the POS register transaction is closed, the system stores and/or transmits and stores the unique identifier (UPC or SKU and Serial Number) along with the 50 point of sale data as determined by the retailer and/or vendor.

5 The third party service provider acts as a central registration computer
system (see, e.g., Fig. 1') and facilitates the link with the retailer. Credit card
10 authorization or check verification data may be processed directly or through an
approved financial institution. The financial institution/third party service
15 provider returns a credit card authorization or check approval number.

15 The unique identifier (e.g., SKU or UPC and the product's serial number)
20 along with the date of purchase and any additional data linked to it is stored in a
central database for future access. The central database preferably physically
25 resides with the third party service provider. Alternatively, applicable portions
30 of the central database can reside with the respective vendors as explained
above.

35 When a consumer returns a product to the retailer, the store associate
scans or otherwise enters the product's UPC or SKU, the product's serial number
40 and, preferably, the customer's zip code. The system transmits this information
45 to the third party service provider (or manufacturer) where certain data resides in
50 a central database from the initial POS transaction and electronic registration as
explained above.

55 The information is processed in accordance with the retailer and
manufacturer's returns policy terms and conditions (each retailer and
60 manufacturer is preferably responsible for updating its own returns policy and
product warranties via a remote log in password). The manufacturer's warranty
65 repair policy is also taken into account, as well as repair localities, including the
repair center's address, phone number, approximate repair charges, etc. The
70 system can also accommodate multiple (different) returns policies and repair
75 warranties for the same manufacturer. This feature will help to satisfy
contractual agreements for specific retailer customers.

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Additional POS information (form of payment, price, etc.) as determined by the retailer and manufacturer may also be stored and linked to this product and/or sales transaction. In some instances, where the manufacturer has more stringent returns policies, the manufacturer may populate and store the product serial numbers at the time when products are shipped (sell-in) to the retailer.

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When the product is sold by the retailer (sell-through) the serial number is retransmitted and the records updated at the third party's database. This feature allows the manufacturer to track specific products with unique warranties and/or returns privileges.

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Once the information is processed, it is transmitted back to the retailer (along with a transaction record number R.A.) and presented in the form of an on-screen menu option(s) with predetermined (canned) text message(s). The retailer associate and/or the customer select the most appropriate option (repair, return/refund or return/exchange, etc.). If the customer selects the return/exchange option, the system prompts the store associate to scan the replacement product's serial number. A hard copy, in the form of a receipt or an expanded version, detailing the transaction (repair information, etc.) may be printed for the customer as well as for the retailer's material move records.

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The transaction may then be closed and the final information (customer selection) is retransmitted, linked to the product record and stored for future use by the manufacturer, retailer, and or third party service provider. The system updates the original records according to which option the consumer exercised. If the repair option was selected the system voids the R.A. transaction number. In case of a return/exchange transaction the system updates the record with the replacement product serial number. It is note that with most manufacturers, the replacement product's warranty expiration date coincides with the original warranty expiration date.

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Referring to Figure 12, a third party service provider 1001 operates a central registration computer system for the benefit of a number of retailers 1003 and vendors 1005. The use of an independent service provider 1001 may be beneficial in encouraging retailers and vendors to utilize the transaction

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registration services. In addition to the retailers 1003 and vendors 1005, a number of other users 1007 may access the third party service provider system through, for example, a modem or internet connection, by way of a toll free 800 telephone number, or other appropriate means. These other users 1007 may include, for example, law enforcement agencies, loss prevention and insurance groups, third party reverse logistics providers, third party warranty providers, third party groups that provide sell through reporting, authorized service centers and others. In other words, the information stored by third party service provider can be used for other applications in addition to the validation of returns.

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Law enforcement agencies may, for example, access the central database to locate information regarding recovered stolen property. Thus, the rightful owner of a recovered property may be readily located. Additionally, locating the rightful owner may provide law enforcement agencies with leads to assist criminal investigations by, for example, helping determine the location from which stolen goods originated. Similarly, insurance carriers and loss prevention groups may be given access to the database to verify sales information and help guard against fraudulent claims.

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third party groups that provide sell through reporting, authorized service centers

and others. In other words, the information stored by third party service

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returns.

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Customer information such as name, area code and the like is typically not gathered at point of sale. Accordingly, a vendor may include a registration card with the product which may be filled in by the customer and forwarded to the vendor or the third party service provider. The information from the product registration card may then be appended to the transaction record to provide

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5 corresponding customer information. Of course, in lieu of a mail-in product
registration card, it is also possible to permit on-line registration, telephone
registration, or other available forms of registration. Of course, any such form of
10 registration should require a sufficient indication of information that can be used
5 to verify that the transaction is being registered to a rightful purchaser.

15 FIGURE 15 schematically illustrates a process that may be used for on-
line consumer post-sale registration. To ensure that the post-sale registration is
being made by a proper customer, the process goes through an initial validation
20 stage to verify information that would be known to a proper customer and which
is already available to the central registration system by virtue of the previous
POS registration. For example, the consumer may be prompted to enter the
25 brand name of the product (step 1501), the store at which the product was
purchased (step 1502), the purchase date (step 1503), the product serial number
30 (step 1504), and the product description (step 1505). Correct responses to these
inquiries permit the user to proceed to the second stage of the post-sale
35 registration wherein the consumers name, address, phone number and other
suitable information is obtained and stored with a link to the product
information. Of course, adequate steps should be taken to ensure consumer
40 privacy.

45 As shown in FIG. 12, at the point of sale (POS), the retailer may transmit
applicable information to the third party service provider 1001 to be included in
a multi-vendor database 1009. If desired, the central registration computer
system may include a database 1011 for use in verifying credit card or check
50 transactions. If this capability is used, the third party service provider may
return a credit card or check approval number at the time of the sale.

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Additionally, a database 1013 may be provided for information pertaining to the return policies of particular retailers and vendors.

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The system permits customer service requests (CSR) upon receipt of applicable information such as a UPC number, serial number, or customer zip code. In response to a CSR, the third party service provider will return pertinent information such as the purchase date, return status in view of the applicable return policies, a return authorization number if appropriate, warranty/repair information such as a list of authorized repair centers, or other information. For example, user tips may be downloaded to assist a customer in diagnosing a problem, properly connecting electronic equipment, etc. Such information may be included in a local retailer database, a third party service provider database, or a manufacturer database. The third party service provider and manufacturer databases are preferably available seven days a week, and 24 hours a day.

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FIGURE 12A further illustrates a preferred operation of the system

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illustrated in FIGURE 12 during electronic product registration. FIGURE 12B further illustrates a preferred operation of the system illustrated in FIGURE 12 during a product return transaction.

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Turning now to FIG. 13, the third party service provider system may include retailer and manufacturer validation tables containing specific return policy information. Maintenance of these validation tables is preferably the responsibility of the individual retailer, manufacturer or other party. In other words, the retailers and manufacturers are provided with access to these validation tables so that they may provide and update the applicable return criterias for their products.

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In addition, a retailer may access records in separate manufacturer databases at the third party service provider to obtain selected predefined or ad hoc management reporting. For example, a retailer may monitor returns

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accepted by an individual clerk to determine whether the clerk has an unusually high (and possibly fraudulent) return rate. Of course, the third party service provider should maintain security measures to ensure that the retailer can access only records to which it is entitled access. For example, a retailer would be prevented from running reports on sales by a competitor.

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Similarly, the manufacturer may run predefined or ad hoc reports to monitor sales activities. Such reports may be useful, for example, in determining which products are selling well and, therefore, whether production or shipping of these products should be increased. Again, a manufacturer would not be given access to competitors sales information.

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FIGURE 14 is an application overview of the components and functions of the central registration computer system. As shown, the central registration computer system may perform a number of system functions. These system functions include application services, database services, electronic data interchange (EDI), batch services, VRU services, collaboration services, RMI/IOP services, e-mail services, directory services, encryption services, VPN service, load balancing services, systems management services, reporting tools, site analysis services, and HTTP services.

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Application services allow the handling of server-side processing on a world wide web server. This is important to meter traffic to the databases. It also allows for fail over if applications are not available. It also allows for session tracking and extra security. Database services handle the storage and retrieval of the central registration computer system data. This can be important for the speed and integrity of data storage and access. It also can allow the synchronization of data across multiple databases and data-centers. EDI is an application that allows the mapping and conversion of data from the central registration computer system database and converts it to the industry standard

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Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) documents. It also processes EDI documents and will place the results in the database. EDI handles the communications of data to and from value-added-network electronic mail boxes. Batch services support the set of processes that allow the scheduling and logging of jobs that may be run as part of the system. This includes scheduling transfers of data, cleanup processes, database conversions, content updates, alert triggers, audit processes, etc.

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VRU services is the set of telephony services that allow the system to implement applications on the database. This can support applications that allow retailers at the point of return to check returns verification status and warranty information. Collaboration services allow accounts and central system personnel to communicate real-time and provides for on-line customer service to help decrease costs, decrease time to handle service requirements, and increase the level of customer satisfaction. RMI service allows for remote execution of transactions between central system applications and its accounts, and can be one of the ways to process data exchange, and execute electronic registration or returns verification transactions. E-mail services can facilitate the processing of e-mail between the central system and the accounts (vendors, retailers, service centers). It can include hosting of e-mail services for those accounts who do not have their own Internet Service Provider (ISP) and can also handle consumer accounts (if needed).

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Directory services are the systems services that allow a standard technique for storing, using, and accessing user-centric information. This database can drive the user data for the central system web, e-mail, and collaboration services, and can also serve as the basis of central system security. Encryption services allow the central system to encrypt (secure) data that is transferred over the Internet. This could be important for securing non-private network datafiles.

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This service also includes management/publishing/serving of the public key associated with the central system. VPN services allow the central system and its retailer accounts to establish a private communications channel on the

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Internet, and may be implemented at the hardware or software level. It can be

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very important to maintain security on the Internet, yet allow transactions to perform up to requirements. Load balancing services route transaction traffic to appropriate services, systems, and sites (datacenter) depending on system availability, performance, and location of the request. This can be important because it allows a transaction to continue if a site or host is down, and ensures

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that the system is always available.

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Systems management services monitor the availability, security, and performance of the central system applications. It also can allow the central system to escalate problems if they are not resolved in a timely manner, and can allow the central system to manage the network and host functions in addition to the data center. Reporting tools allow authorized central system accounts and central system personnel to easily access the database. This will allow *ad hoc* analysis of data for an account and will allow straightforward deployment of new reports. Site analysis tools allow the central system to analyze its world wide web traffic. This includes the overall amount of traffic to the site or to specific sections of site. It can allow the central system to see where the traffic is coming from and what type of browser is being used. It can also allow the consolidation of log reporting across several hosts. HTTP services is what is typically referred to as a web server. These are the services that allow the central system to handle Internet browser access. It can serve and secure static content and hand off dynamic content requests. It also can allow for intuitive links to FTP services.

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The central registration computer system also includes a number of semi-

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private support components such as data exchange, a communications menu system, alerts, reporting services, and project tracking and user help.

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Additionally, a number of semi-private core components are provided, including account maintenance, product maintenance, warranty maintenance, electronic

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registration, serial number maintenance, returns verification, returns prescreening, warranty inquiry and consumer registration. Although these items require authorized access, they may be shared by a number of individual users and are therefore semi-private.

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The Account Maintenance core component allows the central system to setup an account for either a retailer or vendor. Account setup covers such areas as contact, relationship and equity, account type, user information and authorities. This preferably includes account profile maintenance to maintain account information for each customer; contact/user maintenance to setup and maintain contacts/users for each account (user default and specific authorities may be assigned here); authority group maintenance to maintain various authority lists which are assigned to various groups or account types; account contract/relationship maintenance to track contracts, equity, correspondence for each account; and retailer location maintenance which allows for the maintenance of each retail store location. The product maintenance component allows the retailer, vendor, and the central system to maintain and distribute product information. Retailer/Vendor UPC maintenance allows maintenance of product information at the UPC level. Kit maintenance cross references to store pre-loaded serial numbers that go together in each "kit" shipped. Product type maintenance allows a vendor to define groupings of their products (e.g., TV, VCR).

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The warranty maintenance component allows the vendor to set up return and repair warranty information for each of its products. Policies can be set up

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5 at the product or product type levels. Warranty maintenance sets up and
maintains return and repair warranties. Reason code maintenance maintains
codes by product type to indicate the reason a product is returned. The
10 electronic registration component allows the central system to collect product
registration data from the retailer. This may include several interfaces to collect
this data- EDI to support legacy implementation, and a real-time interface to
support ongoing implementations. Registration transmission is a request from a
15 retailer to the central system to register a product as sold. A registration
transmission processor is a processing program at the central system that
transmits all the edits necessary to process the incoming registration transmission
and send back the confirmation transmission when appropriate. An internal
20 registration audit may provide an on-line interface which will displays
transmission errors that need to be reviewed and fixed before registration is
accepted. A registration confirmation may be transmitted from the central
25 system back to retailer to confirm that the registration was received. A pre-sell
product registration may be used to register a product that is sold through catalog
sales, or to indicate product as sold to a particular retailer for establishing special
return policies.

30 The serial number maintenance component can be used to maintain and
view serial number registration information (returns and warranty expiration
dates). It can also be used to maintain exceptional situations such as an
40 indication that the serial number was stolen. On-line serial number maintenance
may be used to allow an account to view and/or update (depending on
45 authorization) specific information about a registered serial number. Stolen
50 serial number maintenance allows an account to update a specific serial number
as stolen. Serial number manual registration allows for registration (pre-sell and
POS) of a range of serial numbers without scanning or other electronic interface.

5 Serial number history allows for the inquiry of all activity against a specific
10 serial number. The returns verification component provides the retailer or return
center with the ability to verify that a product is eligible for return. A
15 confirmation will be transmitted back which contains a return authorization code
20 or message, return-by date, and repair warranty information if requested. A
25 return verification request may go from a retailer or return center to the central
30 system. A return verification processor may be used to edit and process the data
35 sent in and to send confirmation data back. A return eligibility confirmation can
40 be transmitted from the central system back to the retailer to verify the product is
45 eligible for return.

5 The returns prescreen component permits verification of whether or not a
10 product is returnable to the vendor just prior to shipping. This system may be
15 required to ensure that the product being sent back to the vendor will qualify for
20 credit when it reaches the vendor. This is particularly important for those
25 retailers who use returns centers to consolidate returns. The warranty inquiry
30 component allows an authorized service center to access information regarding a
35 product's repair warranty. Access to this information is preferably through a web
40 interface or through the VRU. A product warranty inquiry allows access to a
45 product's repair warranty information. The consumer post-sale registration
50 component gives consumers the ability to register a product against the central
system account. This will allow consumers to have a record at the central
system of the serialized products they have purchased. Also it will allow law
enforcement agents a means to contact the purchasing consumer for stolen
products. This component includes consumer account setup, consumer serial
number registration, law agent access, and provision of a consumer web site.

55 With regard to the semi-private support components, the data exchange
component allows for the exchange of data between the central system and the

5

accounts (vendors or retailers). Data exchange key maintenance maintains multiple user id/password combinations to support different ways of communicating with the account. For each account, data exchange subscription maintenance maintains which types of data will be sent to their systems using

10

the data exchange mechanism. Startup services are the processes used to support the initial loading of the account's data into the central system database.

15

Vendor/Retailer data exchange are the processes that set up and control the exchange of data with accounts. Product maintenance push will allow the movement of the product file information to the retailer with little development

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on the retailer's part. This will include only information needed to drive POS terminals for each retailer. The data exchange file generator are the programs that generate the different types of files that contain the different types of data.

25

The Internet menu system component is what an individual user (central system employees, accounts, and consumers) will see when they log onto the system. It

30

will be used by the central system personnel (intranet) and the vendors, retailers, and service centers (extranet) that have access to the central system. Account application maintenance defines which applications will appear on each account's "menu", based on user access rights. Application billing structure maintenance defines the pricing structure associated with a particular application/account combination.

35

The alerts messaging component provides a facility to send alert messages generated from various processes throughout the system. Alert maintenance is a process to set up the type of alerts an account would like to receive. An alert

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processor may be provided to process and send the alerts. The reporting

component provides the account with various standard reports for tracking electronic registrations and return verification data. For example, an electronic registration summary report can be provided to summarize all registration

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5 information. An abuse audit report can be used to identify patterns of abuse
based on warranty setup. A returns reconciliation report can show the history of
10 registrations including any return request activity. A returns to registration audit
report can show percentage of returns compared with registrations. A returns
5 verification request summary report can show total return verification requests
by return code. The project tracking/helpdesk component provides information
15 exchange between the account and the central system regarding new account
setup, bug fixes, and other pertinent information. Information exchange/project
tracking can provide an ability to track projects and problems, and to exchange
20 other information with the account. Time tracking can provide the ability to
track time against projects such as custom reports and other enhancements
25 specific to an account. A help desk facility could incorporate the problem
tracking portion of the information exchange.

Private support components include audit maintenance, billing system
30 interface, and purge setup/processing. The audit maintenance component can
provide various audits on activity against the central system database. These
audits can be used internally by the central system for tracking an account's
35 usage of the system. An audit activity log can track specific types of activity
against the serial number database. The billing system interface component
20 provides processes for approving the billing of accounts for the central system
services. The actual invoicing and fund collection may be provided by a
standard accounts receivable software package. Billing structure maintenance
may provide information on how each account will be billed. Billing approval
40 can provide an interface for approval of the billing before actual invoicing.
45 Finally, the purge setup/processing component includes the processes and
50 supporting information that will allow the central system to purge appropriate
data from the system. Purge processing may summarize transactional data, save

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to other media (tape, CD, optical), and purge data based on time defaults set at the account level.

10

Turning now to FIGURES 16A through 16G, a user at a retail store may access the central registration computer system to make a customer service request. Upon access, a main menu is displayed which provides the user with options to request return/warranty information, operating/hook-up instructions, vendor/product information, or other information. Figures 16A through 16B illustrate a series of interactive customer interface screens that may be displayed upon selection of return/warranty information.

20

10 As illustrated in FIGURE 16B, the user may, for example, be prompted to input the product UPC number, the product serial number and the customer's zip code. This information is then transmitted to the third party host system of the centralized database to be used in accessing the pertinent database record. The user may also be requested to input a reason for the return/warranty inquiry.

25

15 FIGURE 16C shows information that may be returned to the retailer by the third party host system. In particular, the host system may return additional details concerning the original transaction as well as a list of customer options. The list of customer options may be determined by the host system in light of the applicable retailer and/or manufacturer warranty information included within the validation tables 1013 (see FIGURE 13).

30

40 Turning now to FIGURES 16D through 16G, the retailer selects the option chosen by the customer by clicking on the appropriate choice. The host system then returns pertinent information relevant to the selected option. For example, if free warranty repair is selected, a list of local authorized repair shops may be listed. This list may be printed and provided to the customer by the retailer store. If the customer selects a product exchange, the retailer may be prompted to enter the serial number of the replacement product so that the central

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registration database may be updated accordingly. Similarly, the host system will update the registration database to reflect a return for in-store credit or refund.

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Customer problems with products often are not the result of defects in the product, but rather may simply be the result of a lack of knowledge by the customer on the proper operation or hook-up of the product. Accordingly, the retailer may request information from the host system to assist the customer in the proper operation or hookup of the product. Such information is preferably stored in an appropriate host system database. For example, a manufacturer may download instructions into the database for this purpose. The manufacturer ideally bears the responsibility of ensuring the information is kept current. As an alternative, the host system may access a manufacturer database to obtain this information when requested.

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Figures 17A through 17H illustrate interactive user interface display

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screens that may be utilized when a customer chooses to obtain operating/hookup instructions. As shown in FIGURE 17B, the user is prompted to enter the UPC number or the vendor name and model number. If the vendor name/ model number option is used, the host system may be programmed to recognize the vendor name based upon the first few characters. For example, once a user enters "NINT", the system may recognize the vendor as NINTENDO, as illustrated in FIGURE 17C. Once the vendor name is recognized or completely input, a pull down menu of possible model numbers may be provided for user selection, as shown in FIGURE 17D.

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Referring to FIGURE 17E, the user is then prompted to select information on either the operation or proper hook-up of the product. In this example, the user selects hook-up information. The host system then displays appropriate hook-up information (FIGURE 17F), which may be printed for the customer.

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- 5 Similarly, FIGURES 17G and 17H illustrate the interactive screen displays if
operation instructions are requested. As shown in FIGURE 17G, the user may
10 be prompted to enter additional information concerning the particular operation
of interest, for example, how to set the clock, how to record, how to edit, etc.
15 5 Again, the appropriate information concerning the customer inquiry then may be
displayed and printed.

FIGURES 18A through 18F show interactive screens that may be
displayed when the user selects vendor/product information. The user would
again be prompted to enter sufficient information for the host system to
20 10 determine which records to access, as described above in connection with
FIGURES 17B through 17D. Pertinent information concerning the vendor
25 15 (FIGURE 18B) or the product (FIGURE 18C) may then be displayed. This
vendor information may be useful to the retailer, for example, to contact the
manufacturer with questions or to provide the customer with a manufacturer
30 20 customer service phone number. The product information may be used, for
example, to verify what components were sold with the products so that the
retailer can verify the return of all major components. If desired, the retailer may
35 25 also return to the main menu to obtain further information concerning proper
hook-up or operation of the product, as illustrated in FIGURES 18D through
20 30 18F.

40 The implementations described above illustrate the characteristics,
features and advantages of the present invention. These implementations, of
course, are not exhaustive, and other implementations within the scope and spirit
45 25 of the present invention will be apparent to those skilled in the art. Although the
invention is

50 The implementations described above illustrate the characteristics,
features and advantages of the present invention. These implementations, of

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course, are not exhaustive, and other implementations within the scope and spirit of the present invention will be apparent to those skilled in the art. Although the invention is described primarily in the context of a two-level retailer/manufacturer arrangement, other arrangements are available. For example, a three-level individual chain store/store headquarters/manufacturer arrangement may be implemented. Yet further levels may be added.

15 While the invention has been described in connection with what is presently considered to be the most practical and preferred embodiments, it is to be understood that the invention is not to be limited to the disclosed 20 embodiments, but on the contrary, is intended to cover various modifications and equivalent arrangements included within the spirit and scope of the appended 25 claims.

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Claims

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WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

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1. A method for verifying a product return, comprising:
 - 2 entering unique identifying information for the product for which return is sought;
 - 4 transmitting the unique identifying information to a general database for a determination of whether applicable return criteria are met for the product for
 - 5 which return authorization is sought;
 - 7 obtaining product information from the general database which indicates whether the product sought to be returned meets applicable return criteria; and
 - 9 accepting the product for return if the product information indicates that
 - 10 the product qualifies for return.

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- 1 2. The method of claim 1, wherein the unique identifying information is entered by scanning a bar code on the product sought to be returned.

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- 1 3. The method of claim 1, wherein the general database is located at a remote location, and the transmitting is accomplished by establishing electronic communication with the remote location.

40

- 1 4. The method of claim 3, wherein the remote location is a service provider which maintains the general database.

45

- 1 5. The method of claim 4, wherein the general database includes a product registration database containing information received on purchased products including at least date of purchase, and further wherein the general database includes the applicable return criteria for the purchased products.

55

5 1 6. The method of claim 1, wherein obtaining product information
2 includes displaying the product information on a display at the location where
3 the return is being sought.

10 1 7. The method of claim 1, wherein the product information includes
15 2 options available to the person presenting the product for return based on the
3 applicable return criteria.

20 1 8. A method for electronic validation of product returns prior to
2 accepting the product for return, comprising:
3 obtaining unique identifying information from the product at a location at
4 which the product is sought to be returned;
25 5 using the unique identifying information to access a product registration
6 database and obtain product information on the product sought to be returned;
30 7 providing the product information to the location where the return is
8 being sought for use in determining whether the return can be accepted as a valid
9 return under applicable return criteria.

35 1 9. The method of claim 8, wherein the unique identifying information
2 includes a universal product code and a product serial number.

40 1 10. The method of claim 8, wherein the product registration database
2 includes information on purchased products collected at the time the products
3 are purchased.

45 1 11. The method of claim 8, wherein the product information is displayed
50 2 on a display screen at the location wherein the product is presented for return.

5 3 and the product information includes available options with respect to return and
6 4 repair of the product sought to be returned.

10 1 12. An apparatus for validating product returns at a retailer's facility
11 2 prior to accepting the product for return, comprising a local computing system
12 3 having an associated data entry device and display device located at the retailer's
13 4 facility, and being capable of communicating with a host system having access
14 5 to a product registration database, the data entry device being operable to enter
15 6 unique identifying information for the product for which return is sought, the
16 7 local computing system operating in response to the unique identifying
17 8 information to communicate the product identifying information to the host
18 9 system and, thereafter, operating in response to product information received
19 10 from host system to display the product information on the display for use in
20 11 determining whether to accept the return.

30 1 13. The apparatus of claim 12, wherein the data entry device includes a
31 2 scanner operable to read a product bar code providing at least one of a universal
32 3 product code and a product serial number.

40 1 14. The apparatus of claim 13, wherein the data entry device further
41 2 includes a keyboard for manual entry of the unique identifying information.

45 1 15. The apparatus of claim 12, wherein the local computing system
46 2 communicates with the host system by way of an internet connection.

50 1 16. A method of reducing unauthorized consumer returns of purchased
51 2 products, comprising:

5 3 (a) maintaining a product information database for purchased product,
6 4 wherein the product information database includes return criteria for purchased
7 5 products;
10 6 (b) providing unique product identification information to a host system
11 7 having access to the product information database, wherein the unique product
12 8 identification information uniquely identifies a product for which a return is
13 9 sought;
14 10 (c) using the host system to access the product information database to
15 11 determine a return criteria for the product based on the unique product
16 12 identification information;
17 13 (d) determining whether the product qualifies for return based on the
18 14 return criteria;
20 15 (e) transmitting to the location where the return is sought information
21 16 indicating whether the product qualifies for return; and
22 17 (f) accepting the product for return if the transmitted information indicates
23 18 that the product qualifies for return.

35 1 17. The method of claim 16, wherein the transmitted information is
36 2 displayed on a display screen, and the transmitted information includes options
37 3 available to the person seeking the return with respect to replacement and repair
38 4 of the product sought to be returned.

40 1 18. The method of claim 15, wherein the location where the return is
41 2 being sought is a retail location.

45 1 19. The method of claim 16, wherein maintaining a product registration
46 2 database includes maintaining a local database which includes information on

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- 3 products purchased from a particular retailer, and maintaining a general database
- 4 including information on products purchased from a plurality of different
- 5 retailers.

10

- 1 20. The method of claim 19, wherein using the host system to access the
- 2 product registration database, includes first accessing the local database to
- 3 search for the product information, and then accessing the general database if the
- 4 local database does not include the product information.

20

- 1 21. The method of claim 16, wherein the step of providing unique
- 2 product identification information is accomplished by establishing electronic
- 3 communication between the retailer's facility and the host system.

25

- 1 22. The method of claim 21, wherein establishing the electronic
- 2 communication is achieved by way of an internet connection.

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- 1 23. A method of reducing improper consumer returns of purchased
- 2 products of different types, comprising:
 - 3 (a) maintaining a general product information database, wherein the
 - 4 general product information database includes product information indicating at
 - 5 least a date of purchase for each purchased product;
 - 6 (b) defining a particular return criteria for each of the different types of
 - 7 products;
 - 8 (c) transmitting unique product identification information from the location
 - 9 where the return is being sought to a host system having access to the general
 - 10 product database, wherein the unique product identification information
 - 11 uniquely identifies the product for which a return is sought;

55

5 12 (d) accessing the general product information database to determine the
13 date of purchase for the product based on the unique product identification
14 information;
10 15 (e) determining whether the product qualifies for return based on the date
16 of purchase and the return criteria defined for the particular product type;
15 17 (f) transmitting to the location where the return is sought product
18 information which indicates whether the product qualifies for return; and
19 19 (g) accepting the product for return if the product information indicates that
20 the product qualifies for return.

25 1 24. The method of claim 23, wherein defining a particular return criteria
2 for each of the different types of products includes providing manufacturers of
3 the products with access to the host system for the purpose of defining and
4 updating respective return criteria for the different types of products.

30 1 25. The method of claim 23, wherein the applicable return criteria
2 includes return criteria for the manufacturer who makes the product and the
3 retailer who sells the product, and further wherein the manufacturer and the
4 retailer are provided with access to the host system to define and update the
5 return criteria.

40 1 26. The method of claim 23, wherein the step of transmitting unique
2 product identification information includes establishing electronic
3 communication between the location where the return is presented and the host
4 system.

5

1 27. The method of claim 26, wherein establishing the electronic
2 communication is achieved by way of an internet connection.

10

1 28. The method of claim 23, wherein the step of transmitting product
2 information is accomplished by establishing electronic communication between
3 the host system and the location where the product is sought to be returned.

15

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1 29. The method of claim 28, wherein establishing the electronic
2 communication is achieved by way of an internet connection.

25

1 30. The method of claim 23, wherein the step of defining a return
2 criteria for each of the plurality of different types of products includes defining
3 different return criteria for products manufactured by different manufacturers.

30

1 31. The method of claim 23, wherein the step of defining a return
2 criteria for each of the plurality of different types of products includes defining
3 different return criteria for products sold by different retailers.

35

1 32. The method of claim 23, wherein the product information includes at
2 least a date of purchase, location of purchase and purchase payment information.

40

1 33. The method of claim 32, wherein the product information is
2 displayed on a display screen at the location where the return is sought.

45

1 34. The method of claim 33, wherein product information further
2 includes a listing of available options with respect to return, replacement and
3 repair of the product sought to be returned.

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1 35. The method of claim 34, wherein upon selection of one of the
2 available options, the general product database is updated to reflect the option
3 selected.

10

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1 36. The method of claim 23, wherein the product information includes
2 date of purchase, location of purchase, purchase payment information, available
3 options regarding return, replacement and repair of the product based on
4 applicable return criteria, and general product information.

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1 37. The method of claim 36, wherein the general product information
2 includes operating instructions, installation instructions, parts list, and repair
3 information.

30

1 38. The method of claim 37, the product information is displayed on a
2 display screen at the location where the product is presented for return.

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1 39. A system for validating consumer returns of purchased products,
2 comprising;
3 a first information processing system having a product registration
4 database containing information on purchased products and return criteria for
5 purchased products;
6 a second information processing system located at a retailer's facility
7 operable to receive input on a purchased product sought to be returned and to
8 transmit to the first information processing system a unique product identifier
9 based on the input;
10 the first information processing system being operable to:
11 receive the unique product identifier;

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12 access the product registration database and determine whether the
13 product qualifies for return based on the unique product identifier and the return
14 criteria; and
15 transmit to the first information processing system product information
16 which indicates whether the product qualifies for return.

15

1 40. The system of claim 39, wherein the second information processing
2 system includes a display which is operable to display the product information
20 3 once received from the first information processing system.

25

1 41. The system of claim 39, wherein the first and second information
2 processing systems are operable to establish a communication link therebetween
3 by an internet connection.

30

1 42. The system of claim 39, wherein the first information processing
2 system is located at a location remote from said retailer's facility.

35

1 43. The system of claim 39, wherein the second information processing
2 system includes a product scanner operable to generate the input by scanning the
3 product.

40

1 44. The system of claim 43, wherein the scanner is operable to read a
2 product bar code indicating at least one of a universal product code and a
45 3 product serial number.

55

1 45. The system of claim 40, wherein the product information includes at
2 least a date of purchase, location of purchase and purchase payment information.

5

- 1 46. The system of claim 45, wherein product information further
2 includes a listing of available options with respect to return, replacement and
3 repair of the product sought to be returned.

10

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- 1 47. The system of claim 46, wherein the display enables selection of one
2 of the available options, and the second information processing system operates
3 in response to the selection to transmit information to the first information
4 processing system for updating of the product information.

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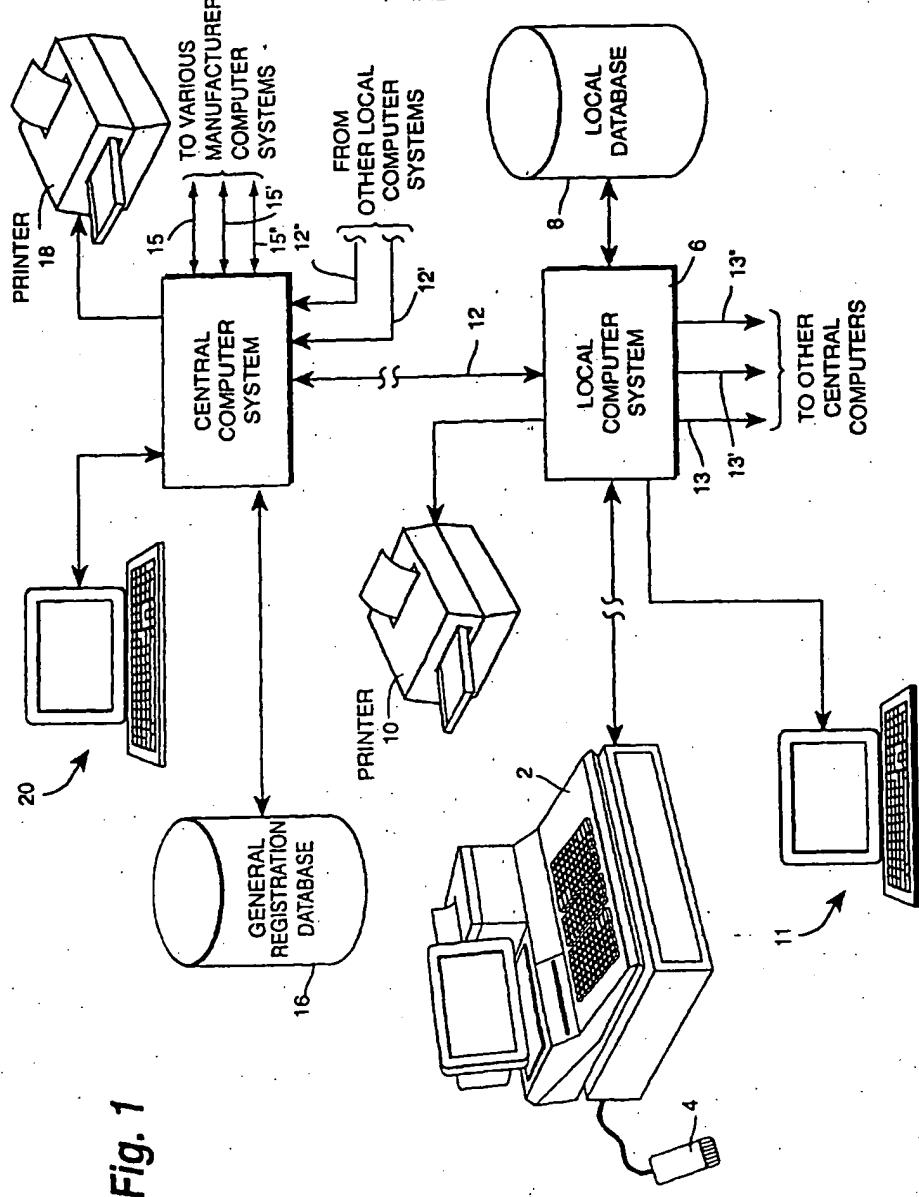
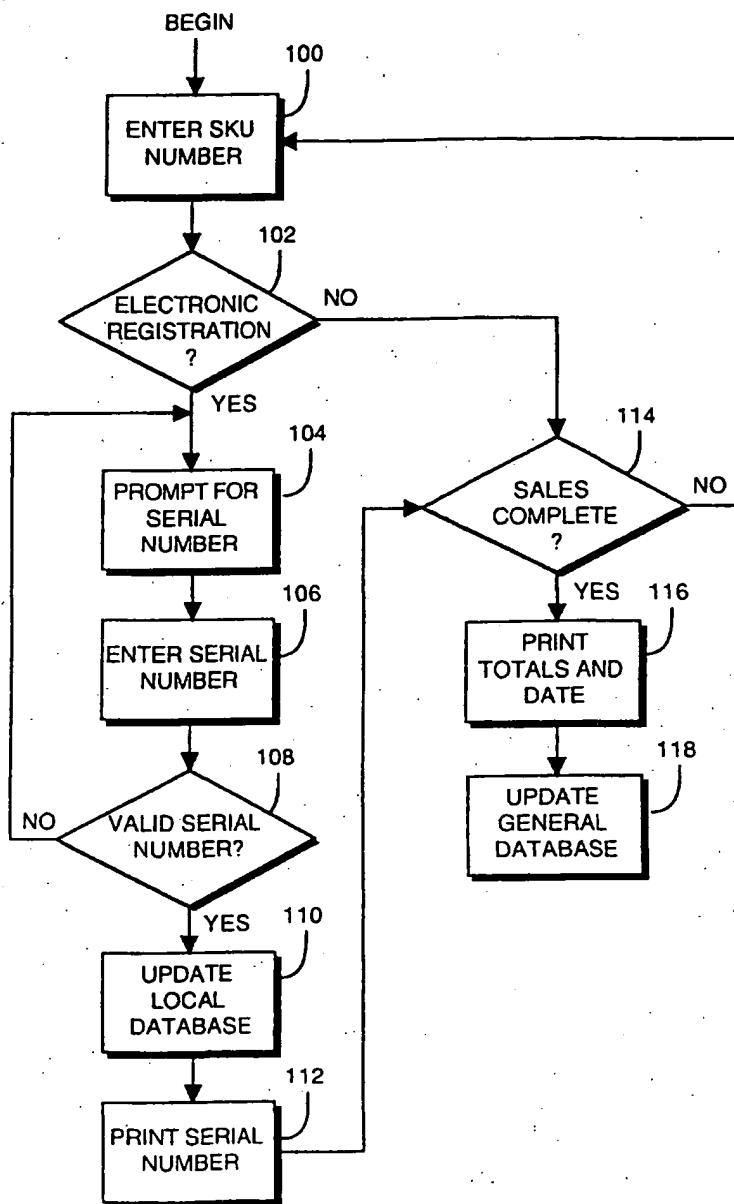


Fig. 2



3/42

30

STORE-MART**SUPERCENTER****WE SELL for LESS**

STORE # 100

ARLINGTON, VA

ST# 0100 OP# 00000104 TE# 30 TR# 05900

SERIAL # G739775156

VIDEO SYSTEM 004549671003 W 42.96 J

SUBTOTAL 42.96

SALES TAX 1 3.01

TOTAL 45.97

CASH TEND 50.00

CHANGE DUE 4.03

TC # 6117107432167

* SAVE RECEIPT FOR REFUNDS / EXCHANGES *

* OF WARRANTY ITEMS PURCHASED *

THANK YOU FOR SHOPPING WITH US

12/14/95 13:37:25

Fig. 3

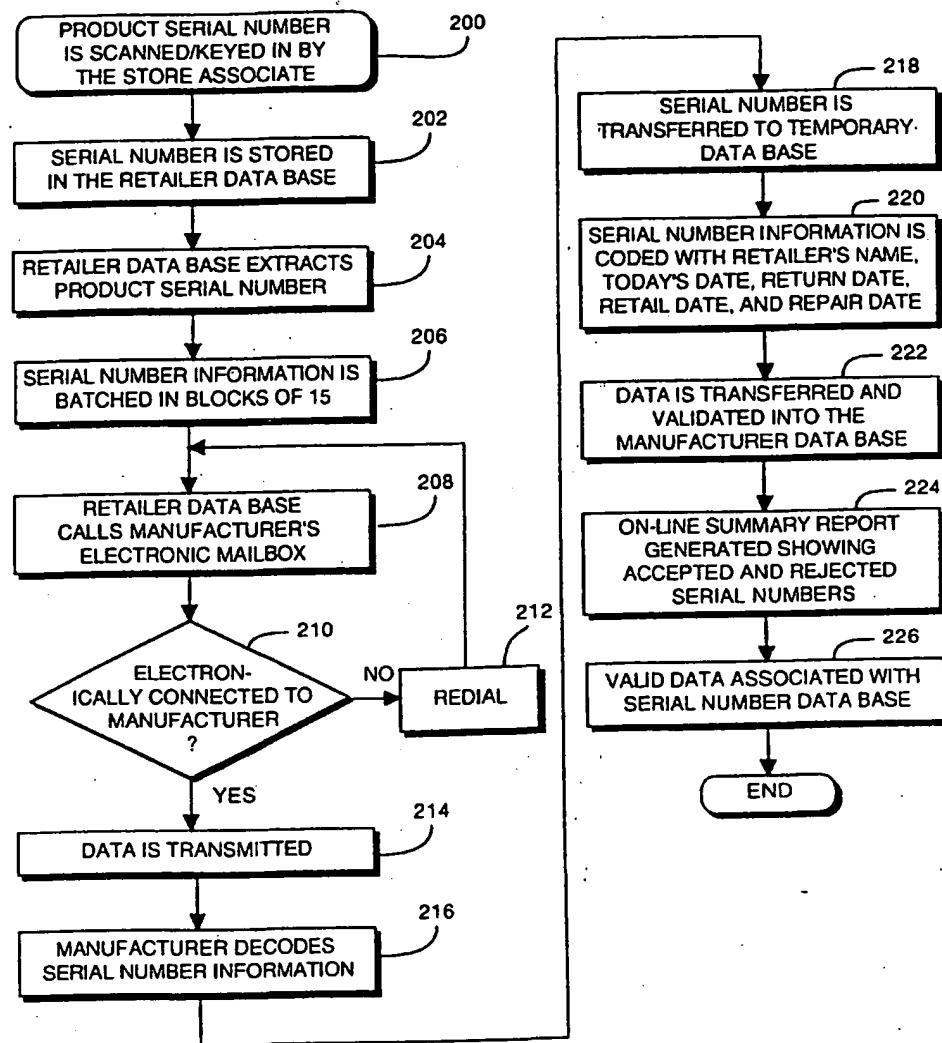
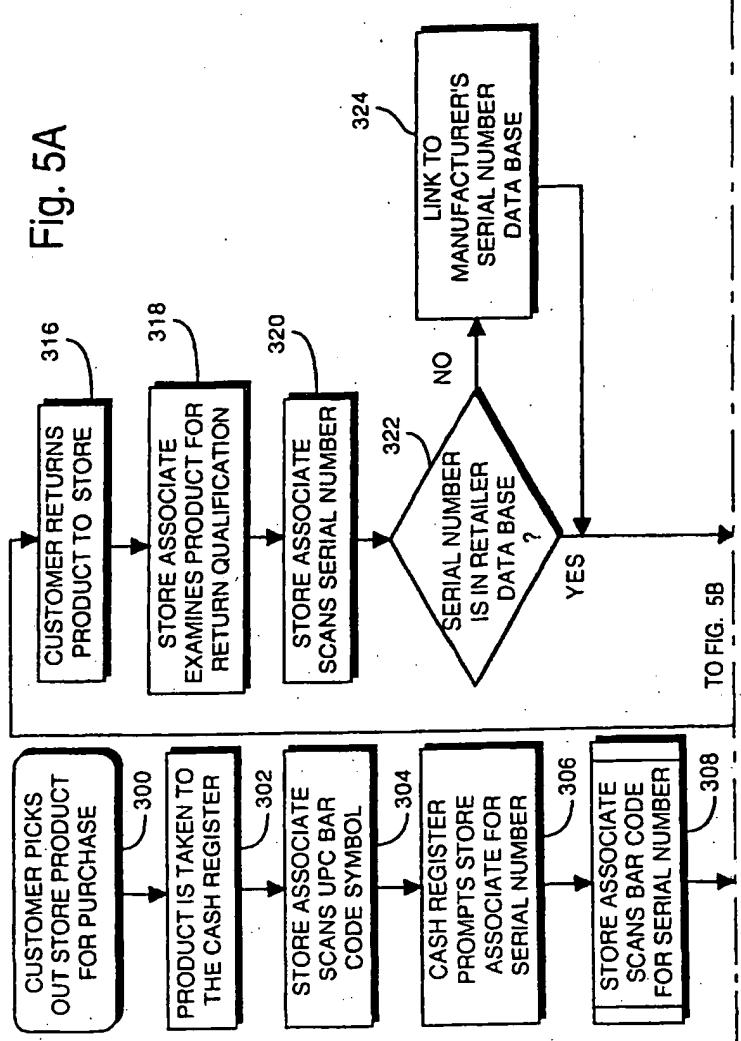


Fig. 4

Fig. 5A



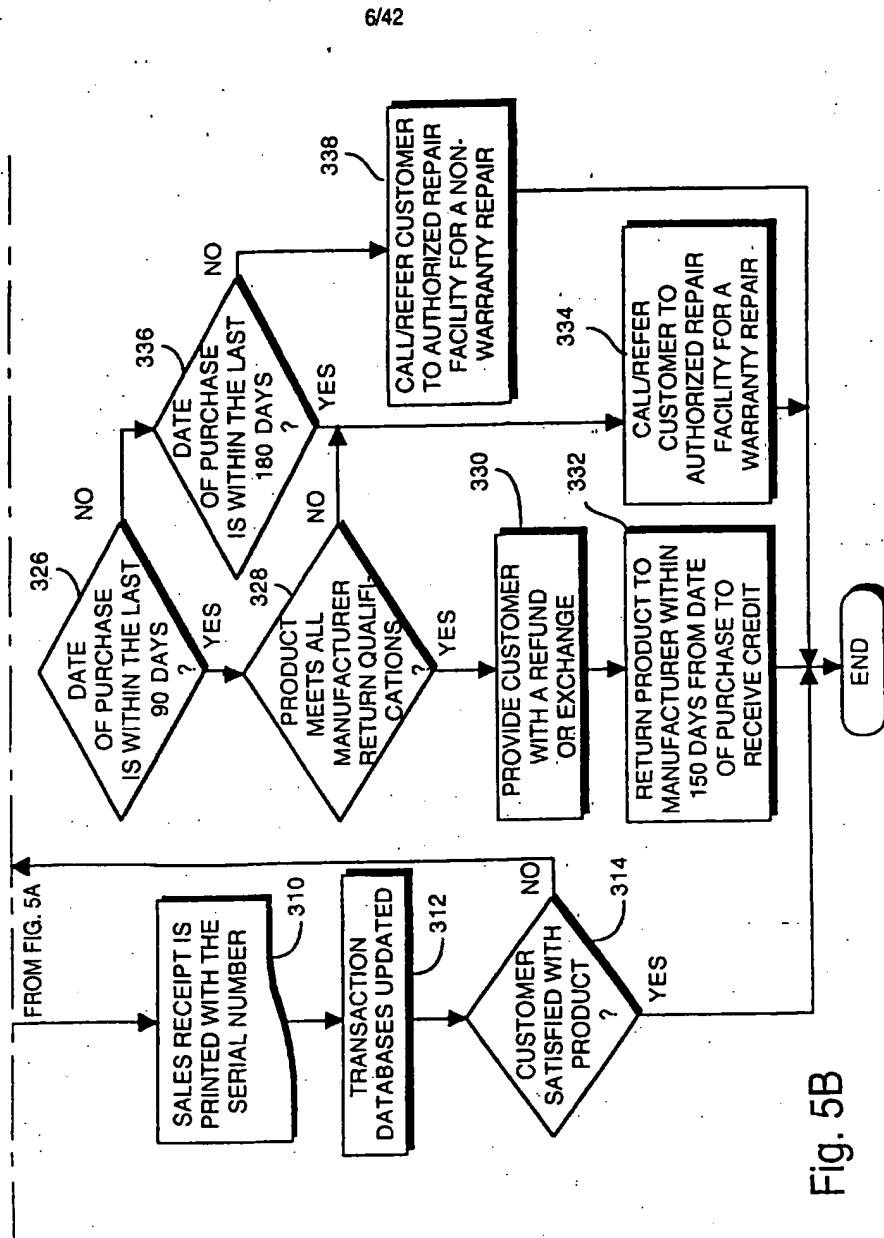
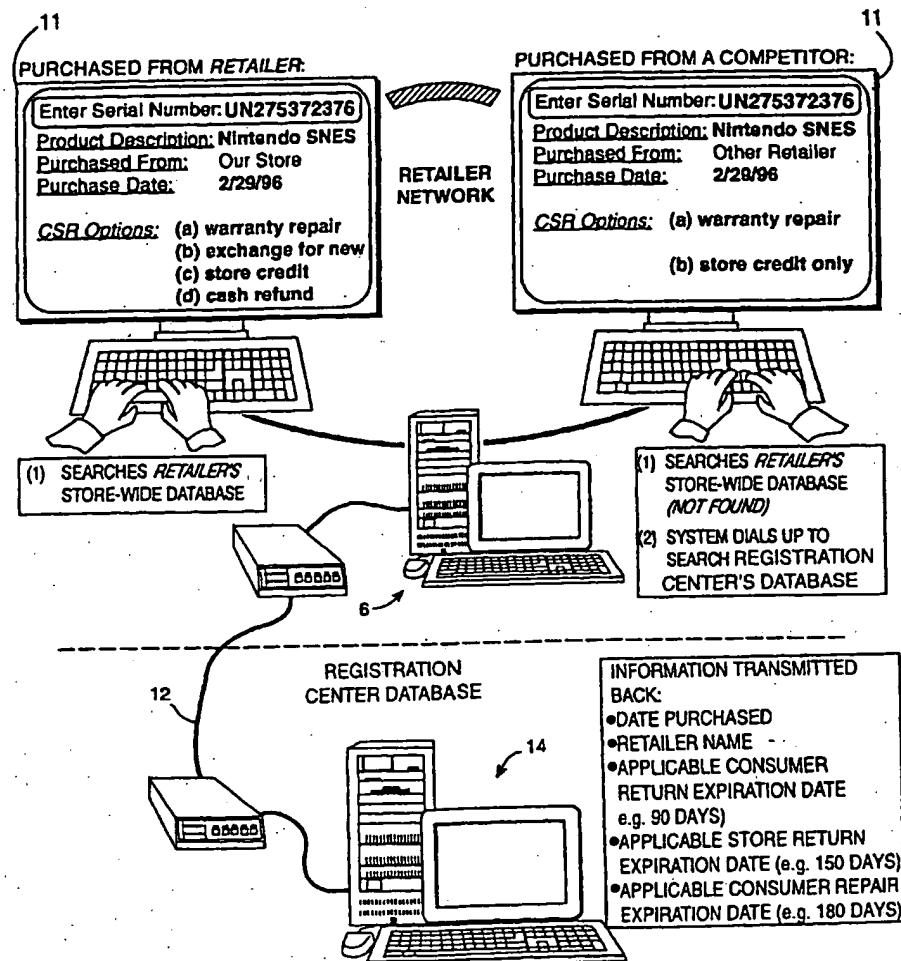
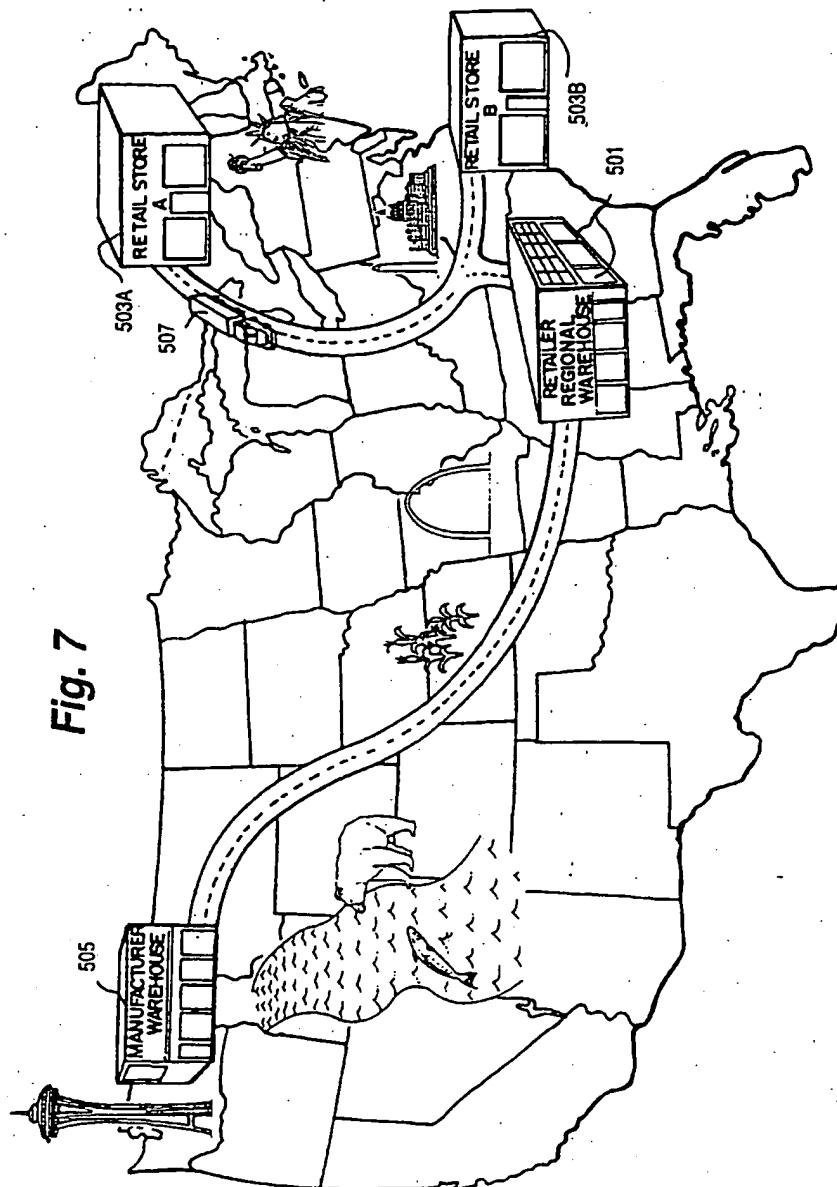


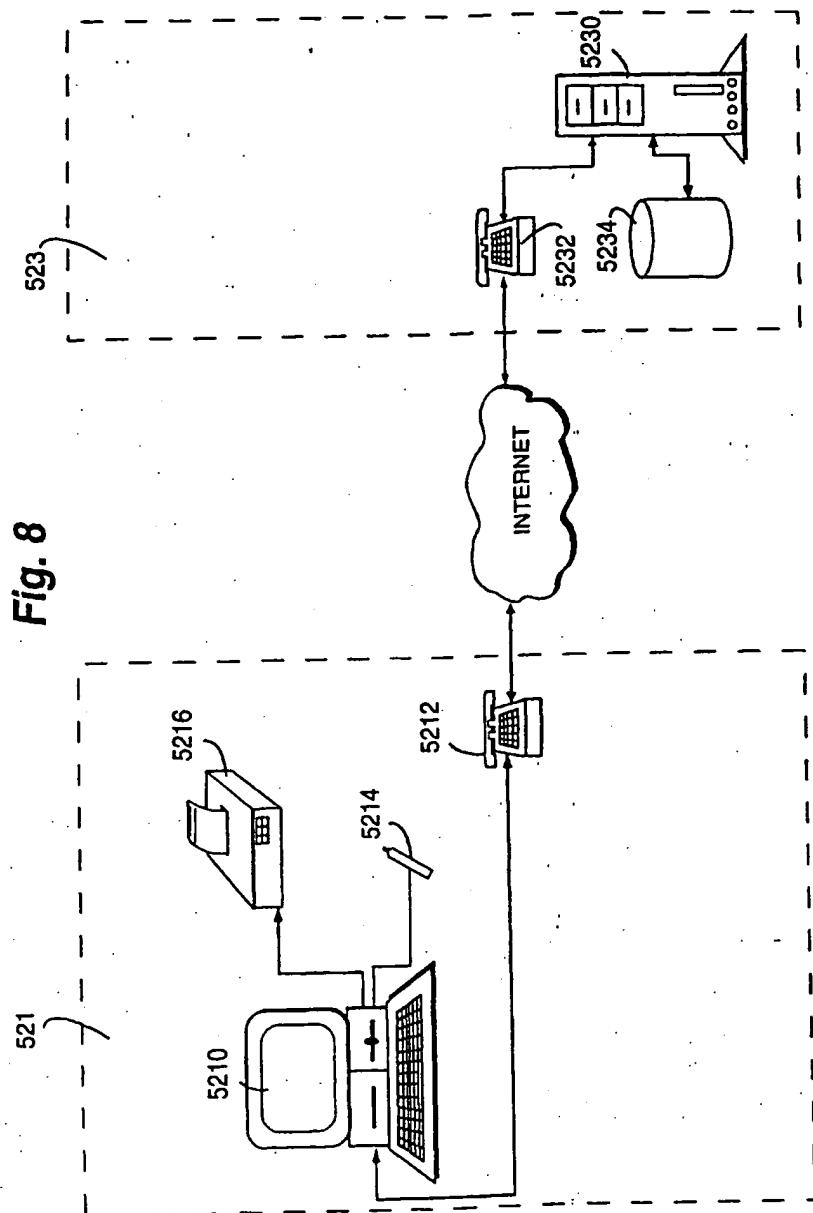
Fig. 5B

Fig. 6
Customer Service Desk
Product Returns



8/42





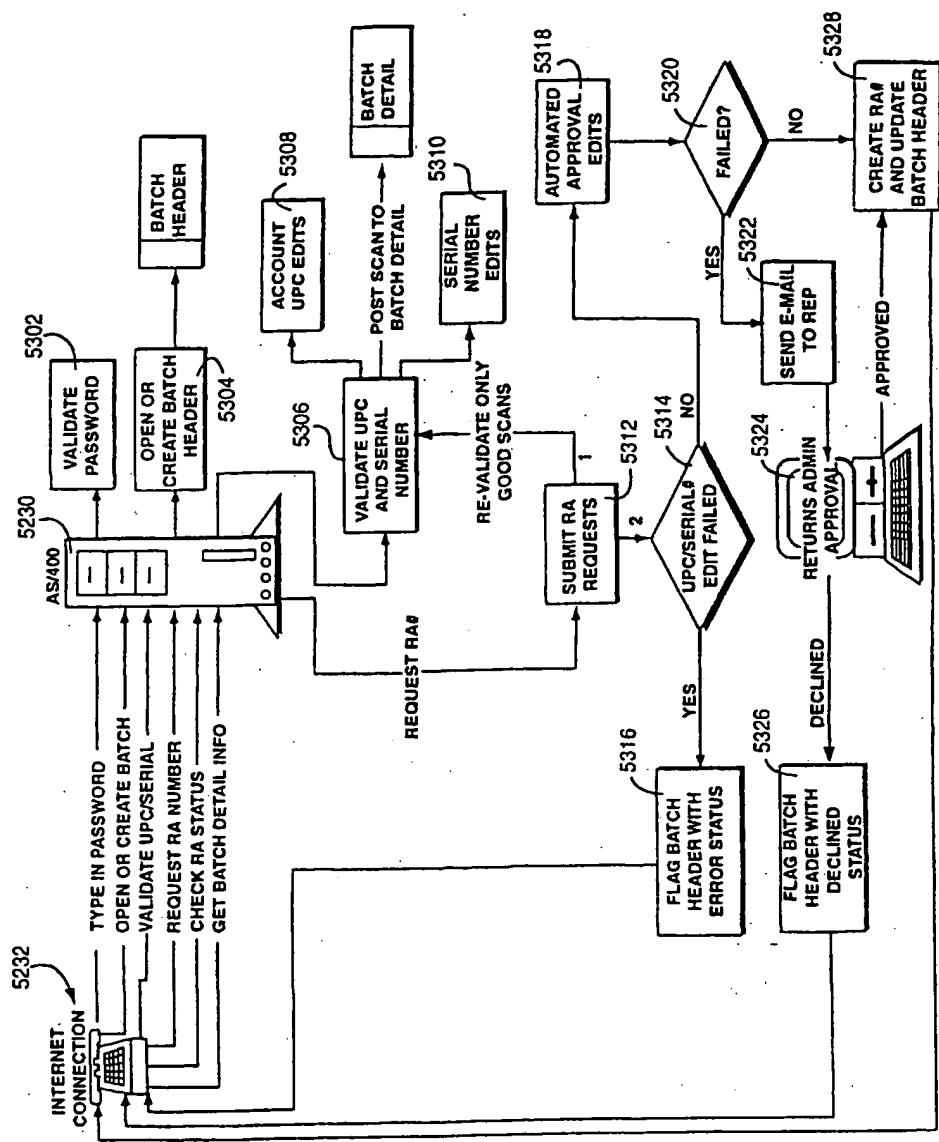


Fig. 9

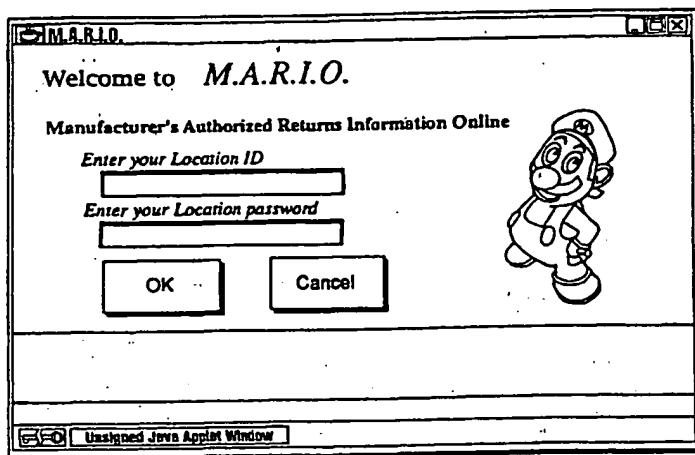


Fig. 10A

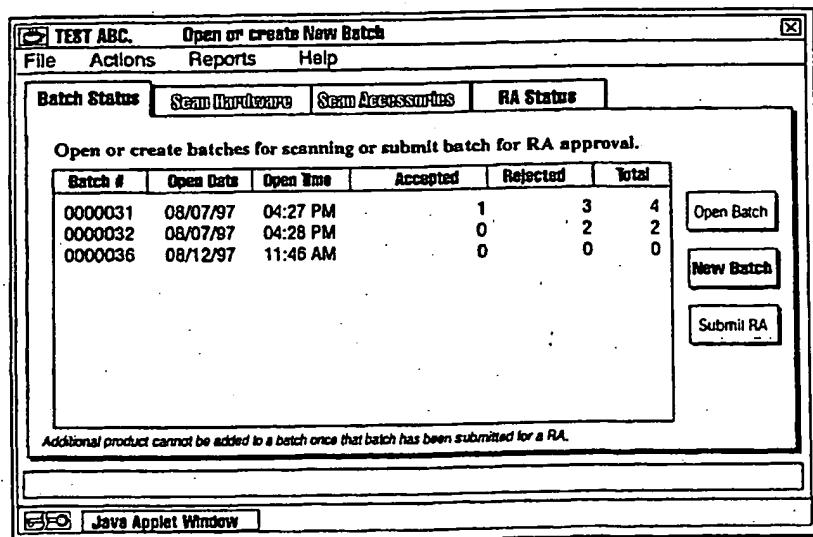


Fig. 10B

12/42

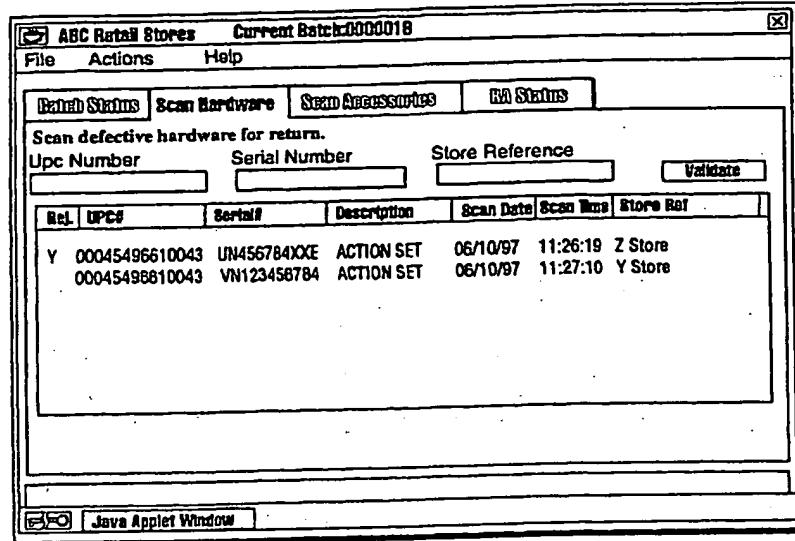


Fig. 10C

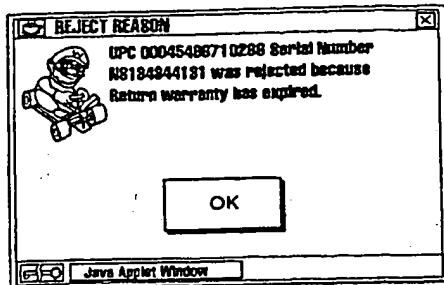


Fig. 10D

13/42

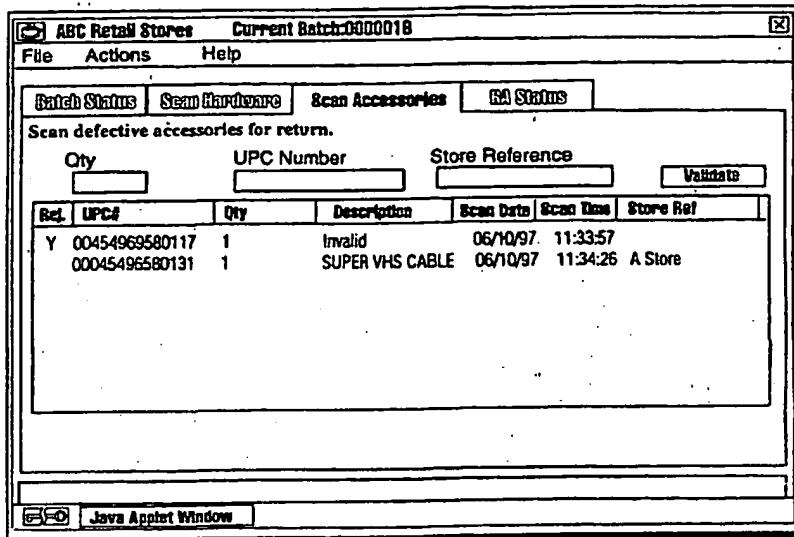


Fig. 10E

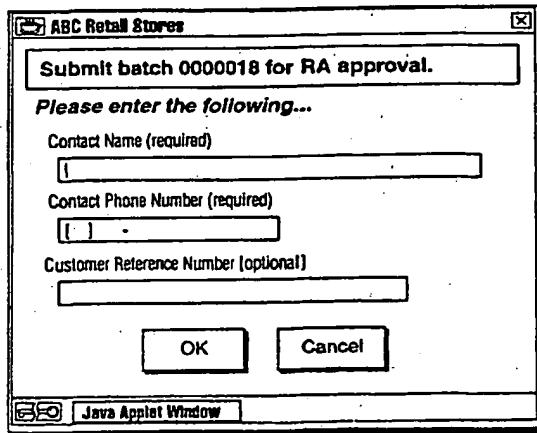


Fig. 10F

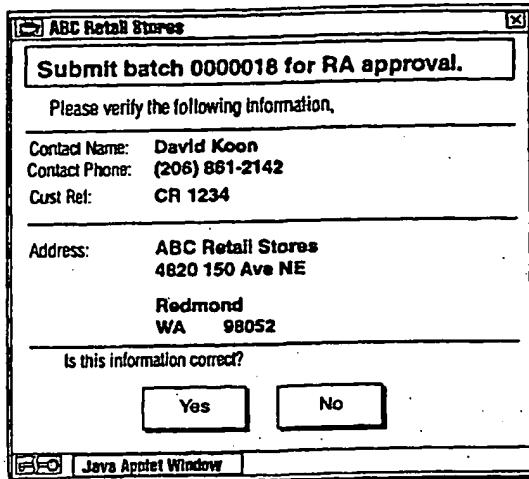


Fig. 10G

ABC Retail Stores ... Current Batch:0000018							
File		Actions		Help			
Batch Status		Scan Hardware		Scan Accessories		RA Status	
Scan batches submitted for RA.							
Status	Batch#	Cust Ref	Tot Scans	Submitted	Approved	RA Number	Expire Date
Pending Approval	0000017		27.0	06/11/97			06/01/97
Approved	0000015	kb12444	21.0	06/10/97	06/10/97	915	06/10/97
Approved	0000016	noa11424556	4.0	06/13/97	06/13/97	918	06/20/97
Pending Approval	0000019		1.0				

Fig. 10H

15/42

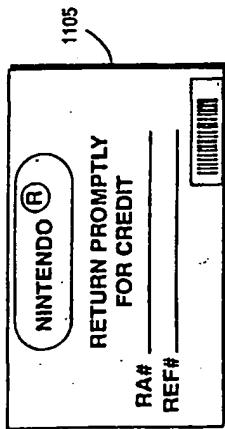


Fig. 11A

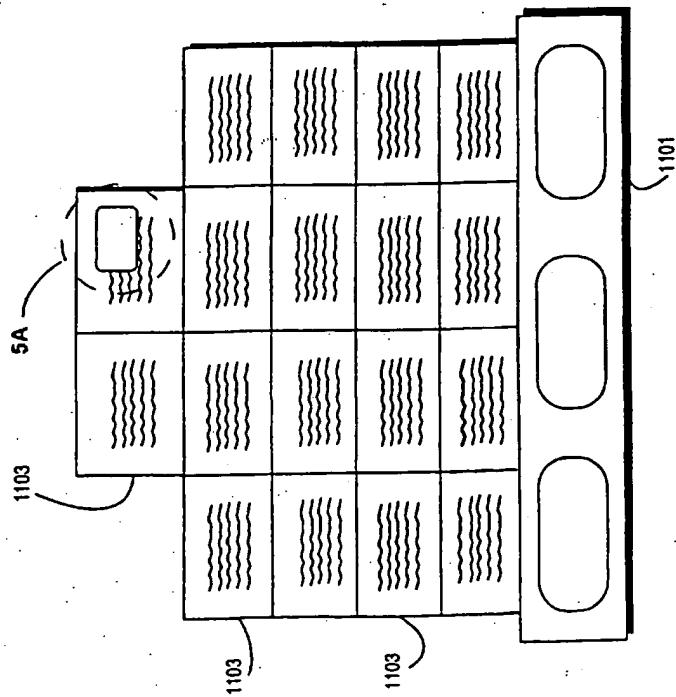
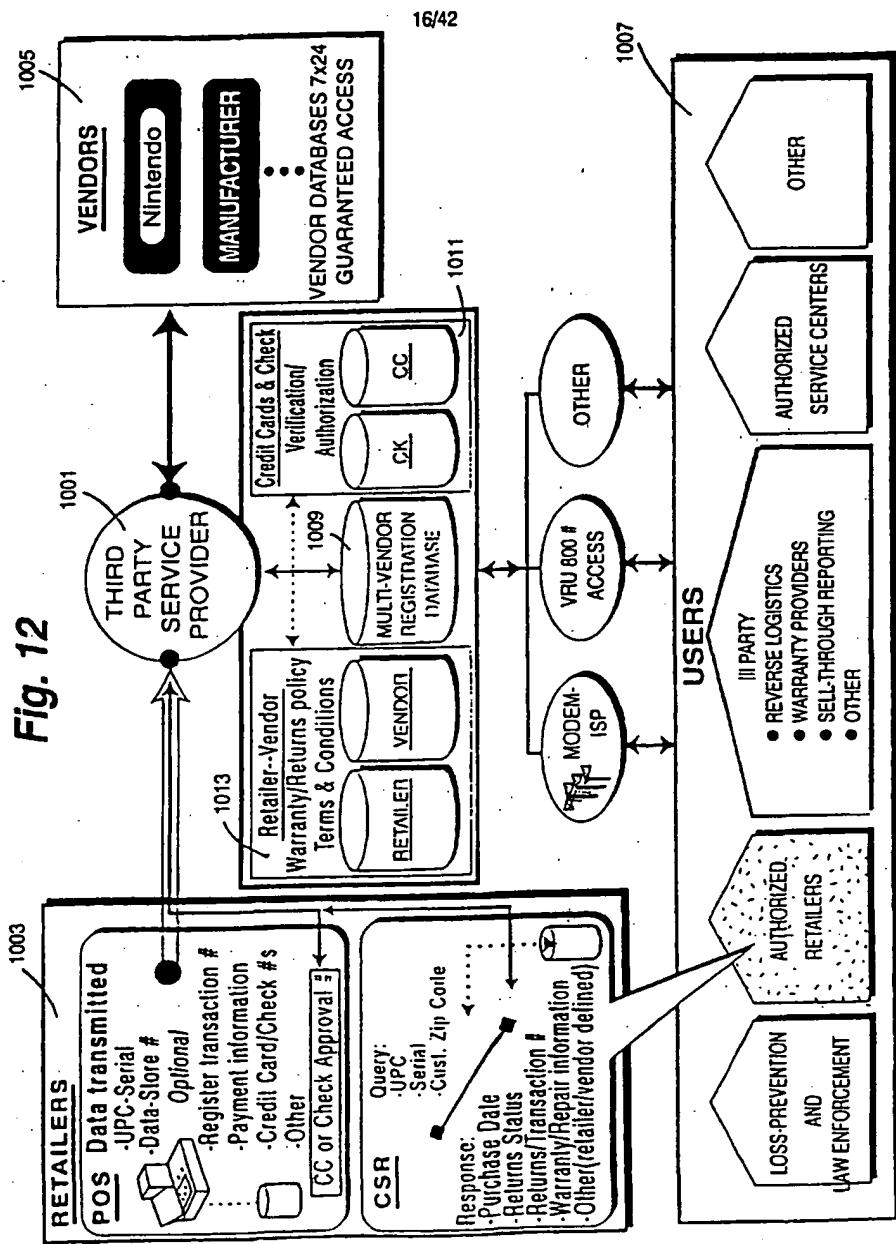
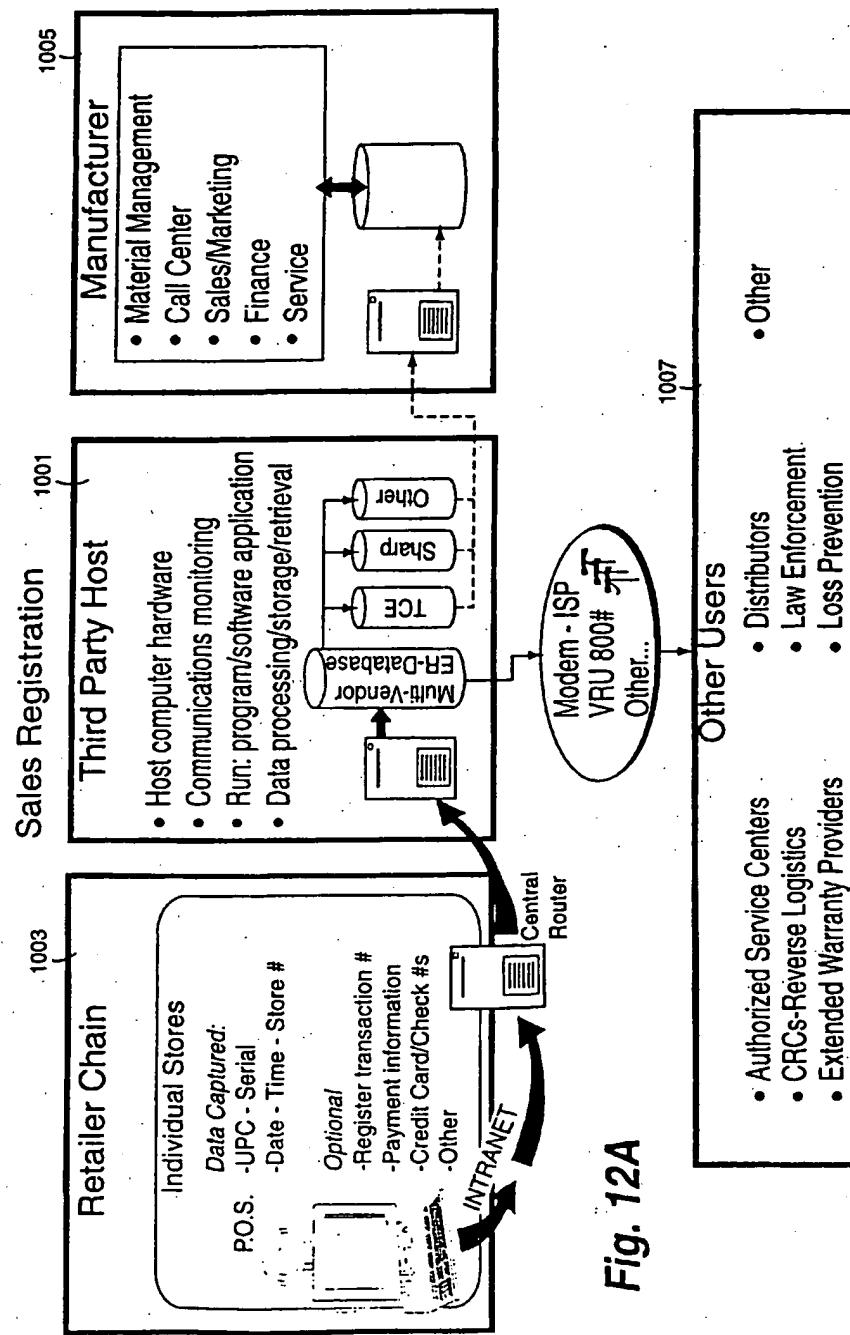
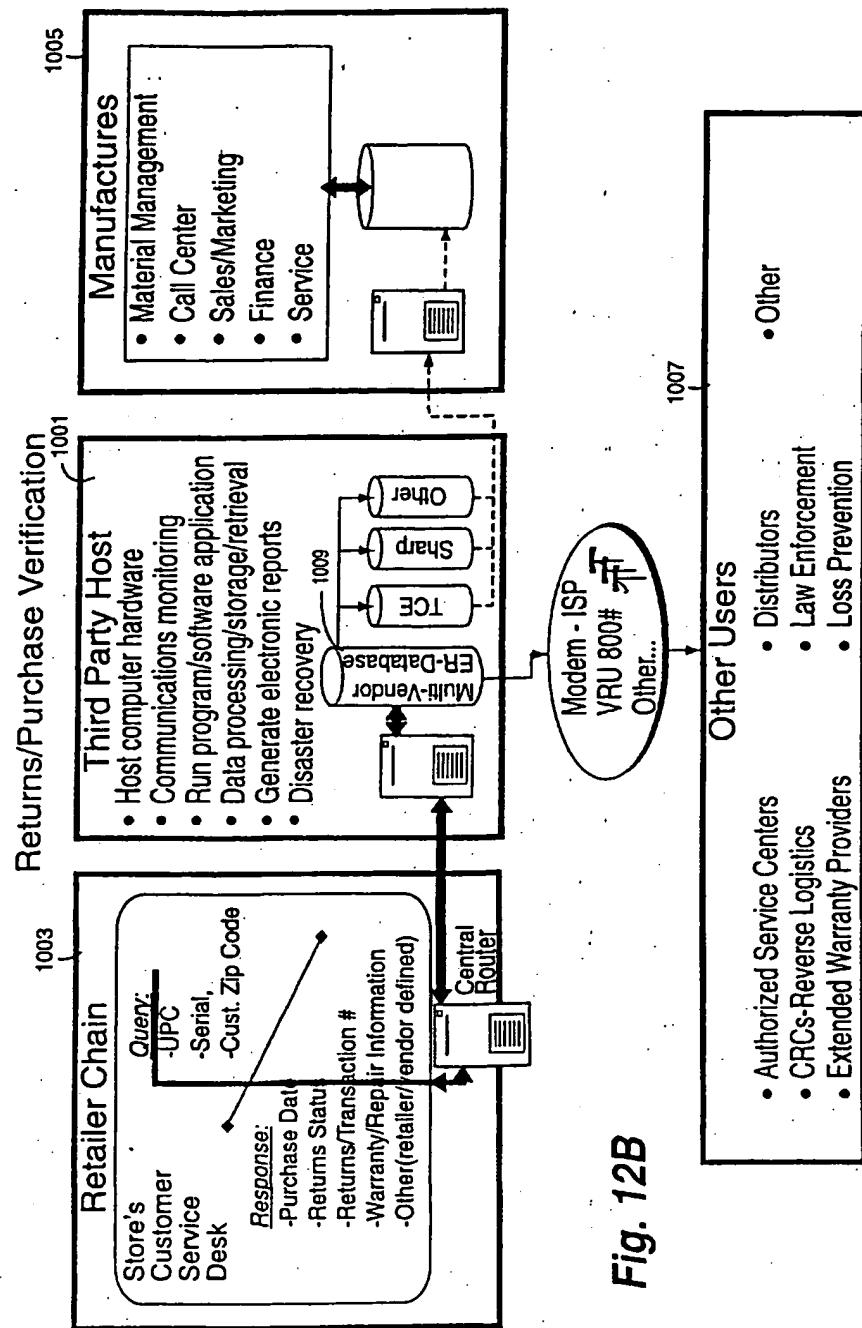


Fig. 11





**Fig. 12B**

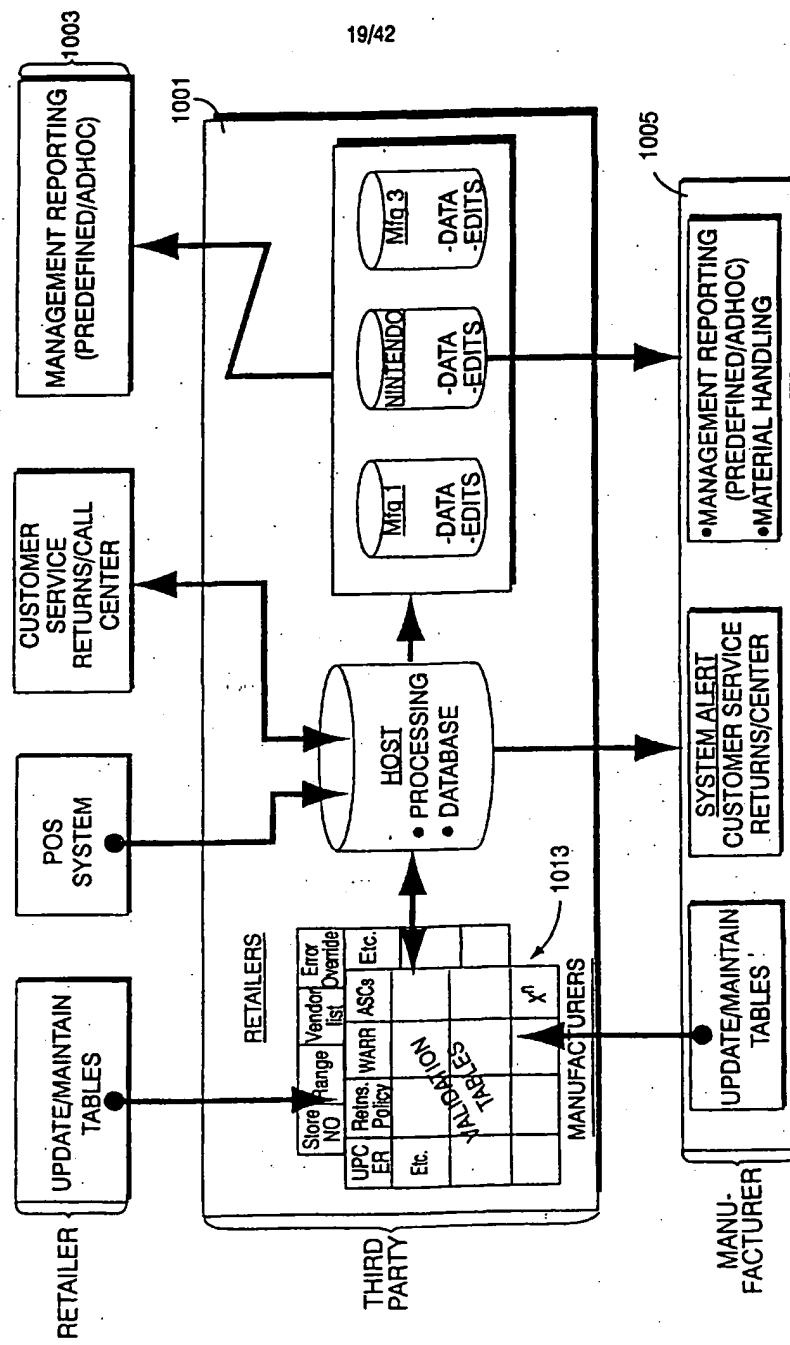


Fig. 13

Fig. 14 Application Overview

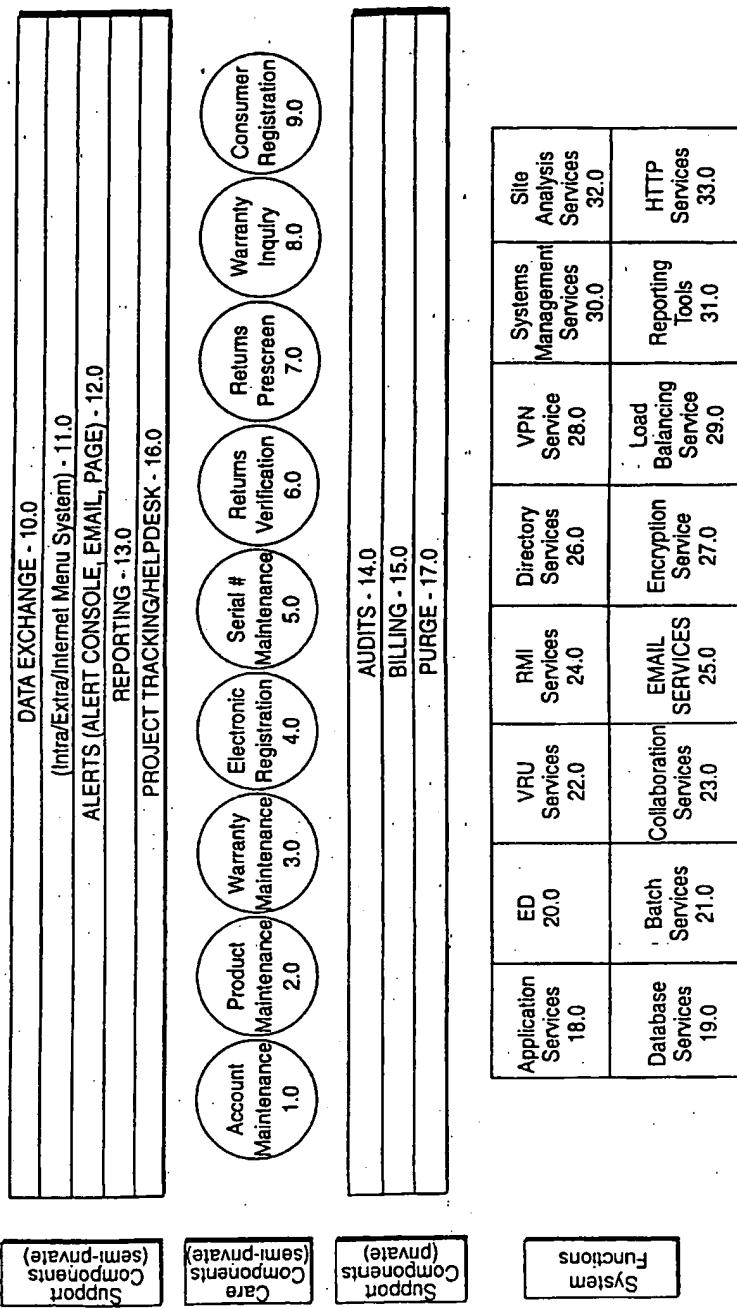


Fig. 15

Consumer Post-Sale Registration	
<p>(1) Validation</p> <p>Brand Name: <input type="text" value="Sony"/> 1501 Store Purchased At: <input type="text" value="Circuit City"/> 1502 Date Purchased: <input type="text" value="1-5-99"/> 1503 Serial No.: <input type="text" value="1234"/> 1504 Product Description: <input type="text" value="Game Boy"/> 1505</p>	
<p>(2) Registration</p> <p>Name: <input type="text"/> Address: <input type="text"/> Phone No.: <input type="text"/></p>	<p>Consumer Protection Information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Privacy Policy• Intent of Use

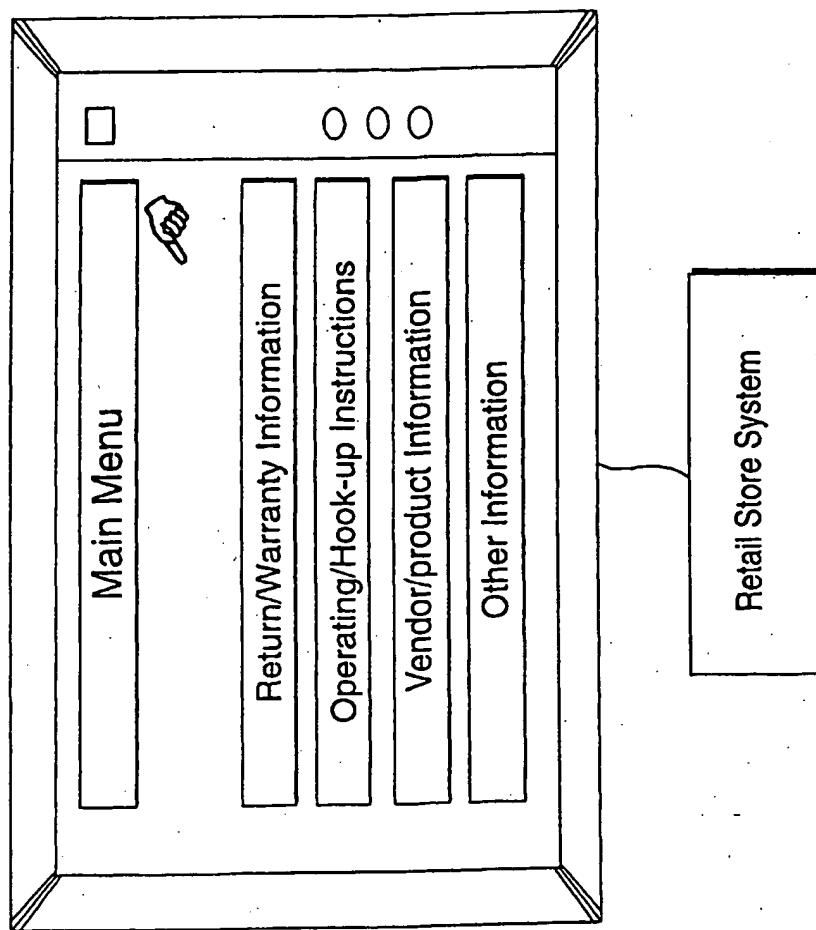


Fig. 16A

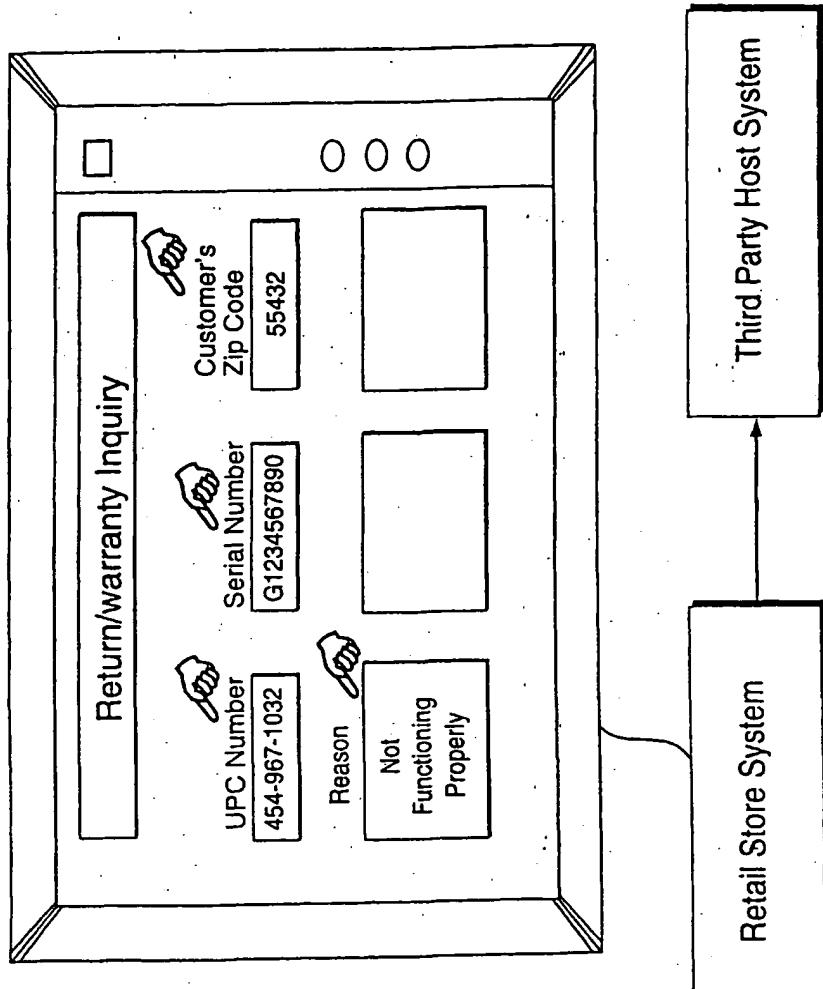
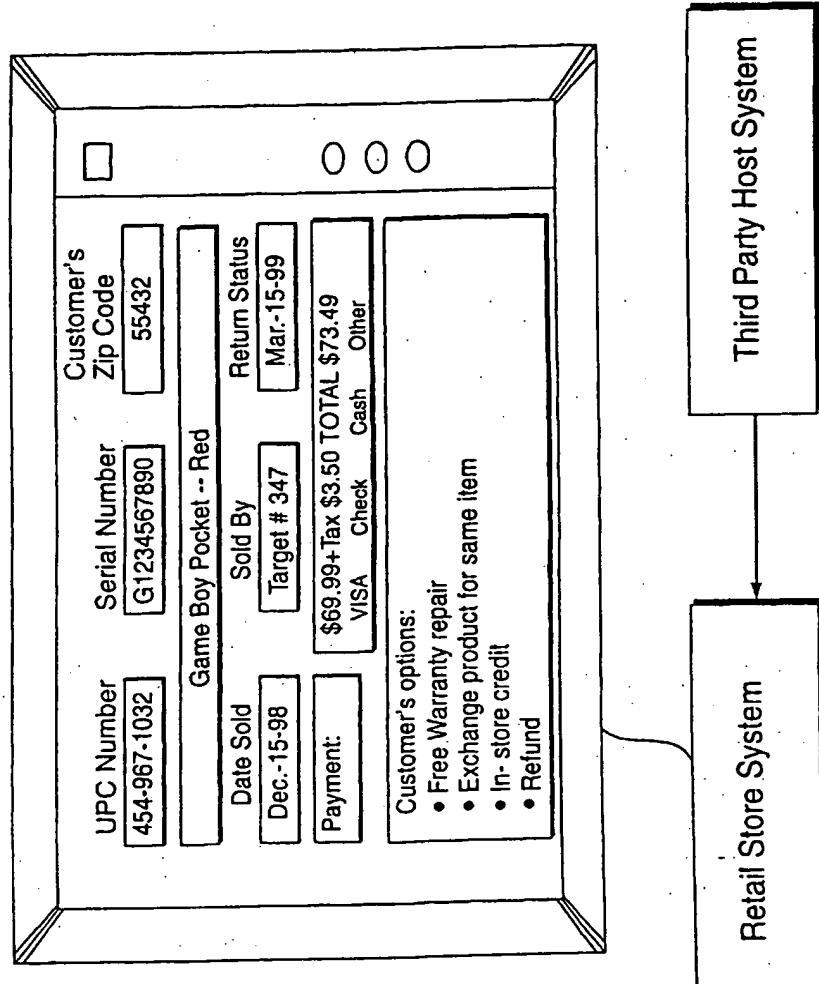


Fig. 16B

24/42



25/42

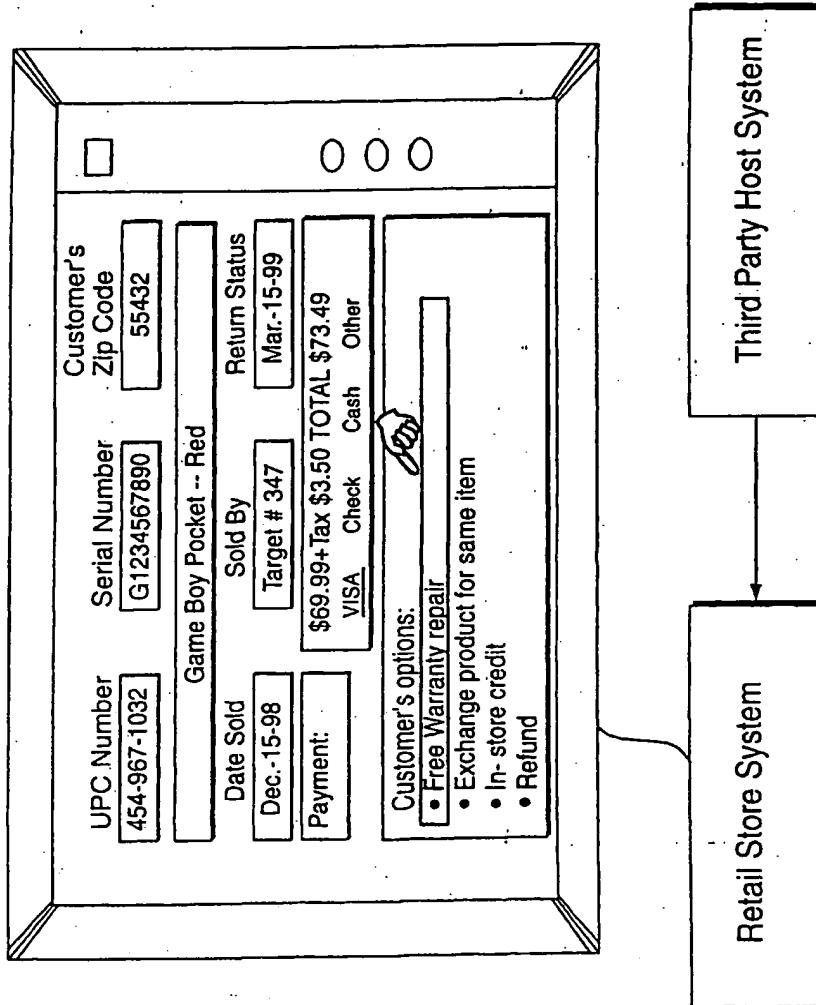


Fig. 16D

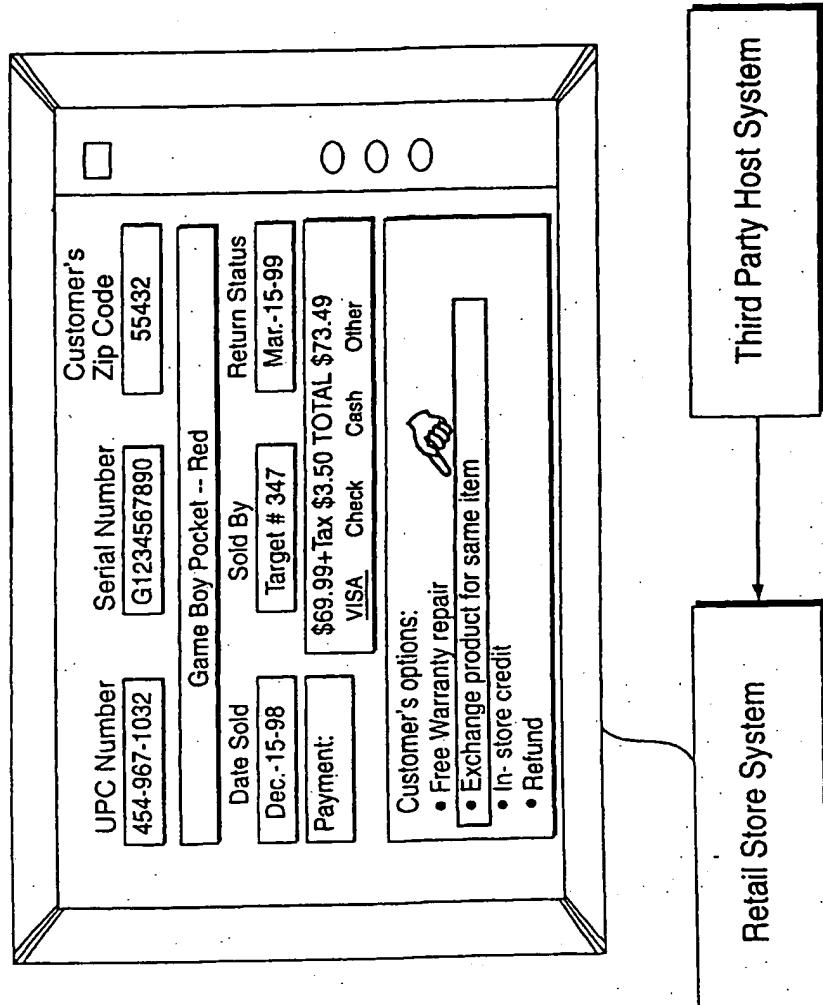


Fig. 16E

27/42

Fig. 16F

UPC Number 454-967-1032	Serial Number G1234567890	Customer's Zip Code 55432
Game Boy Pocket -- Red		
Date Sold Dec.-15-98	Sold By Target # 347	Return Status Mar.-15-99
Payment: \$69.99+ Tax \$3.50 TOTAL \$73.49		
VISA Check Cash Other		
Customer's options: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Free Warranty repair• Exchange product for same item• In-store credit• Refund		

0 0 0

Retail Store System

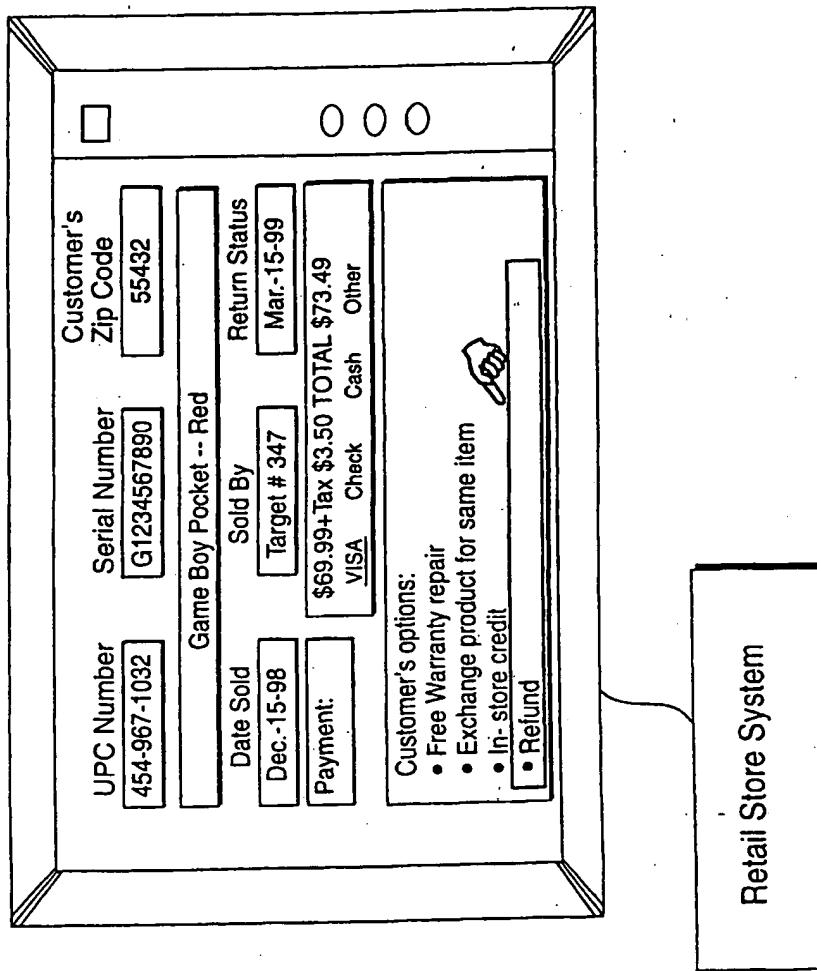


Fig. 16G

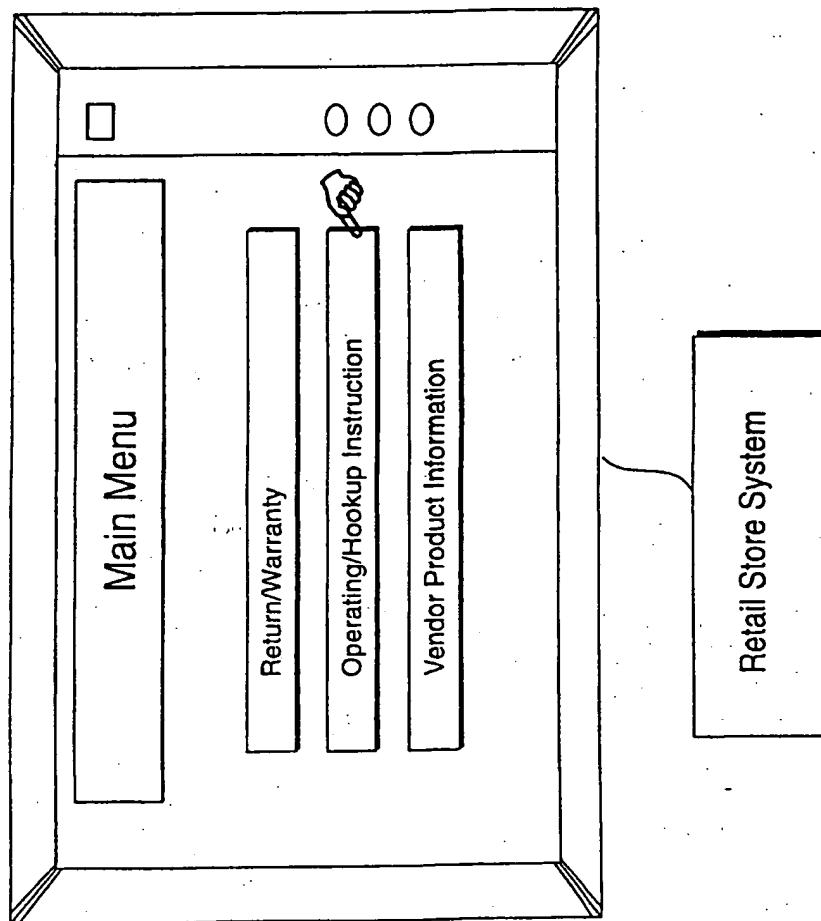


Fig. 17A

30/42

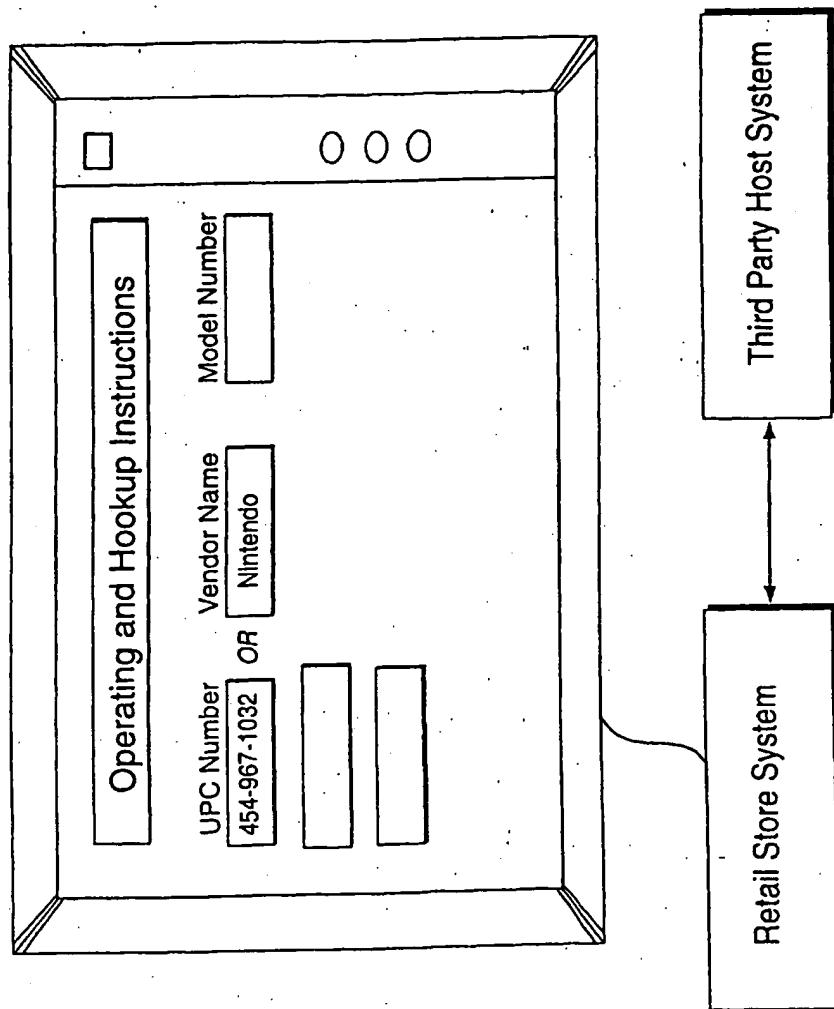


Fig. 17B

31/42

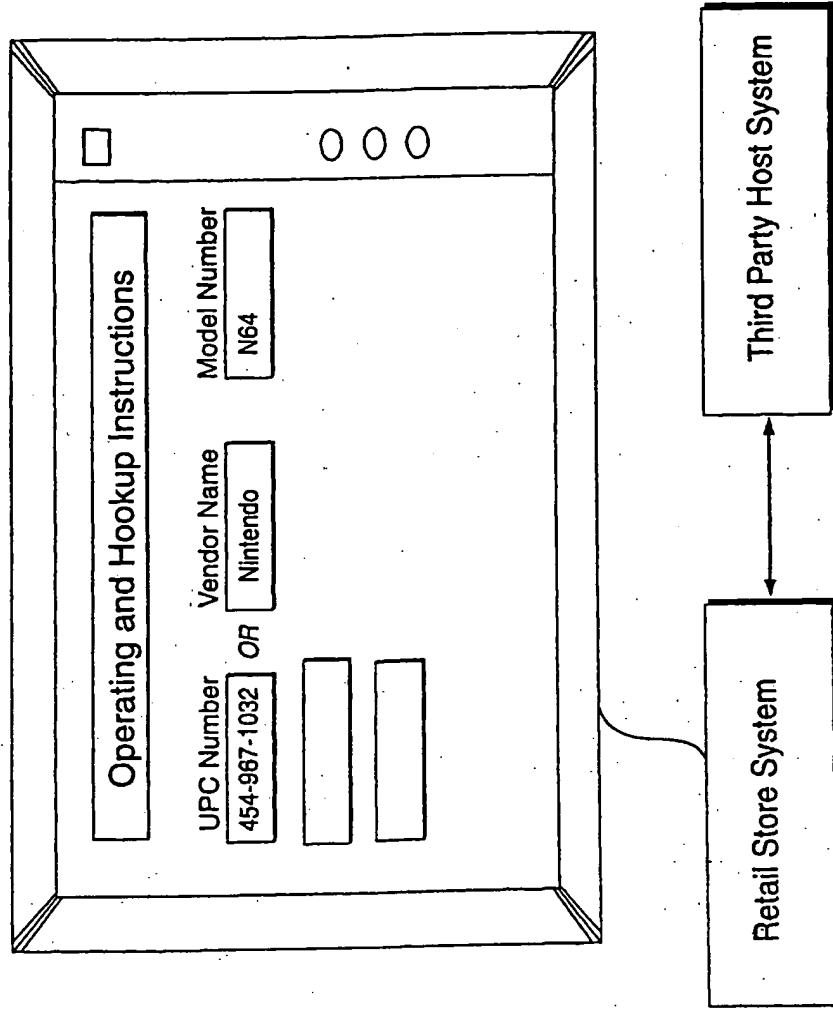


Fig. 17C

32/42

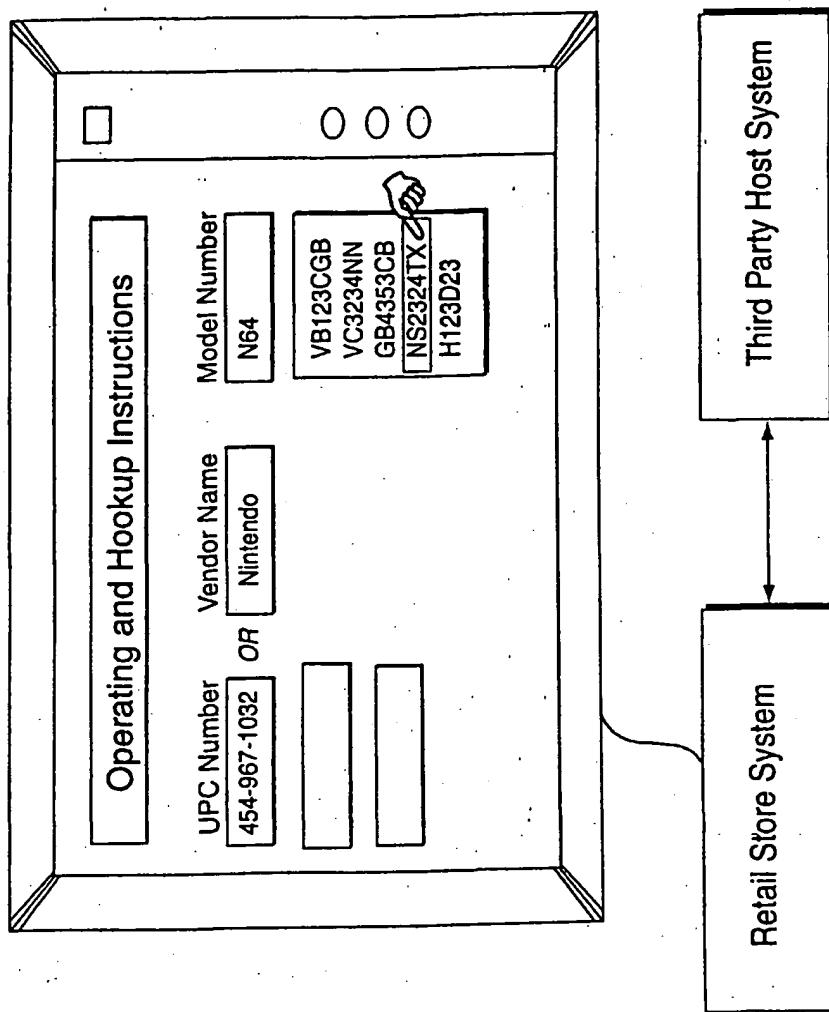


Fig. 17D

33/42

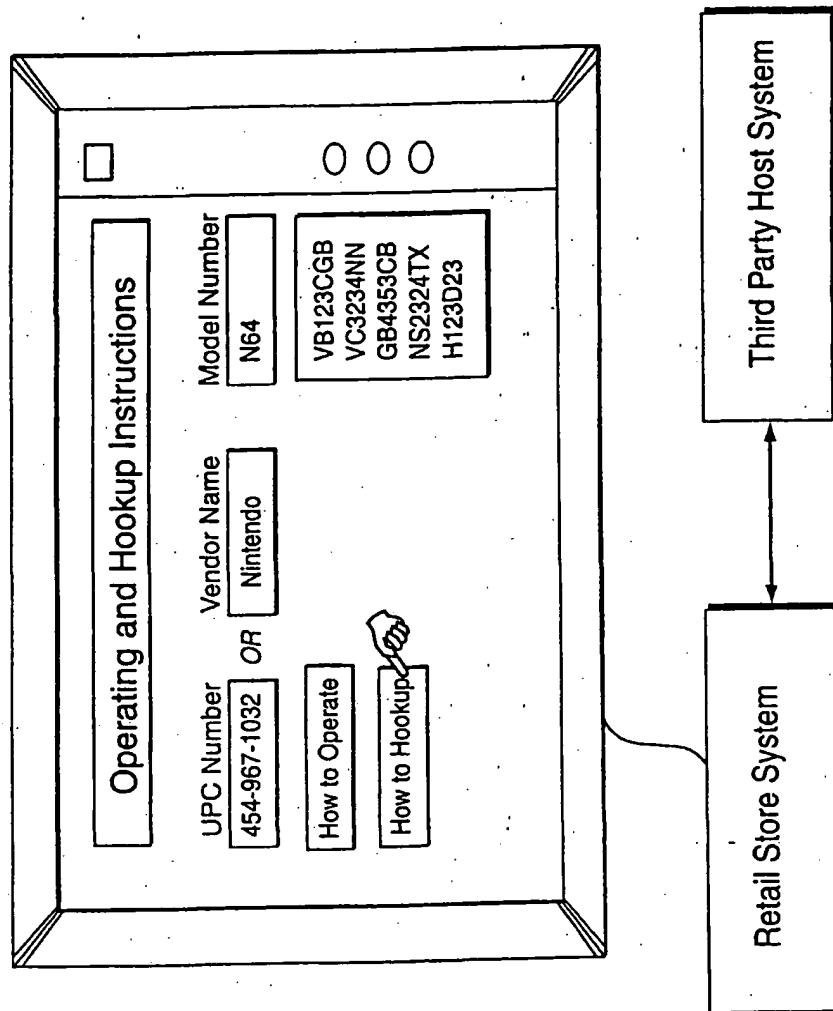
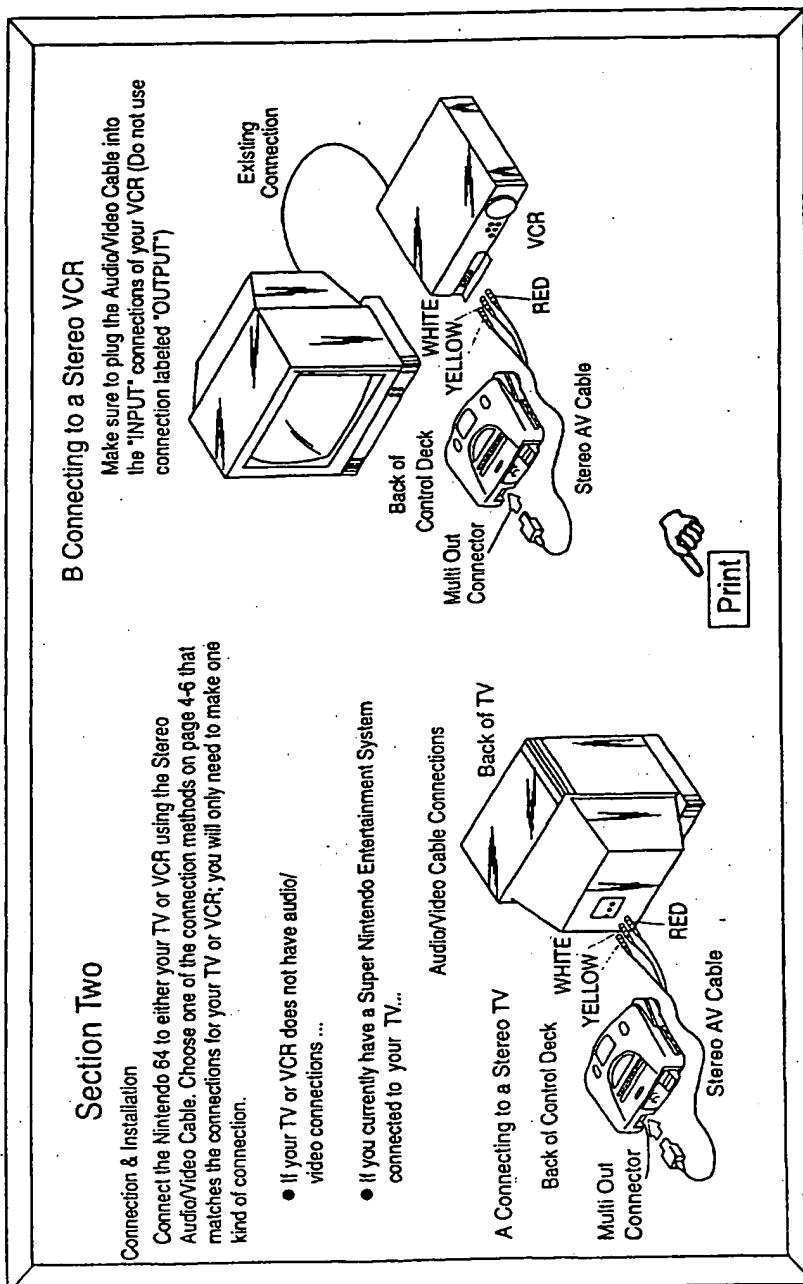


Fig. 17E

**Fig. 17F**

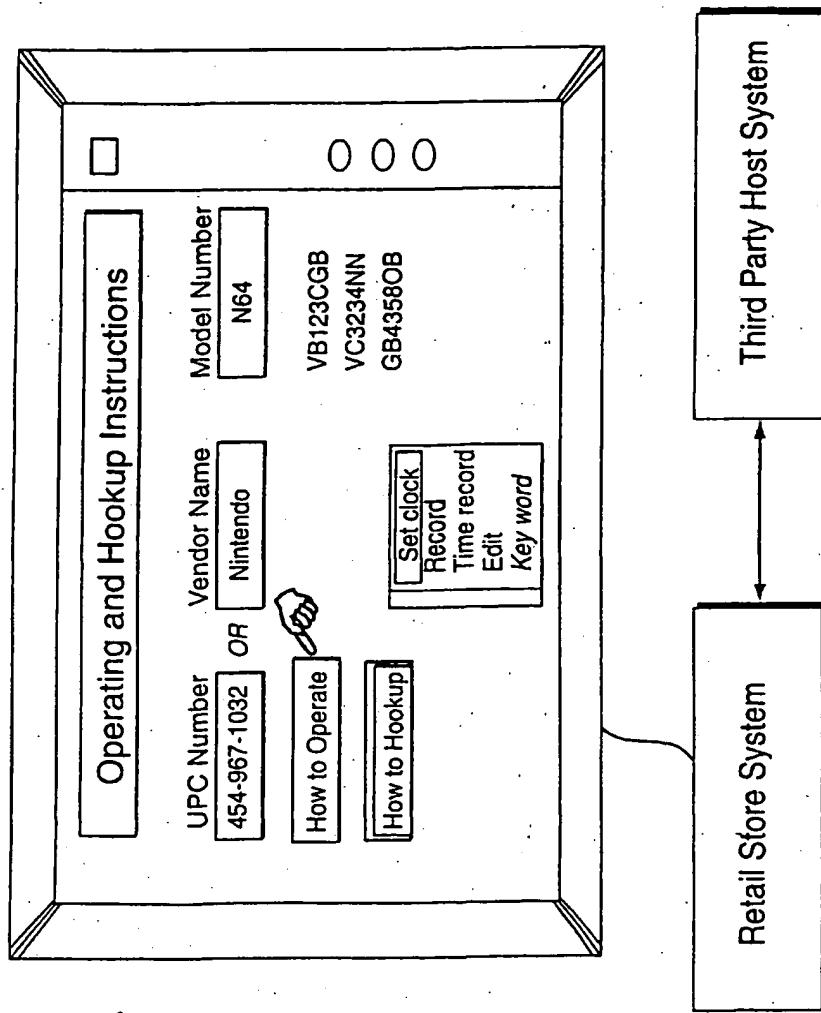


Fig. 17G

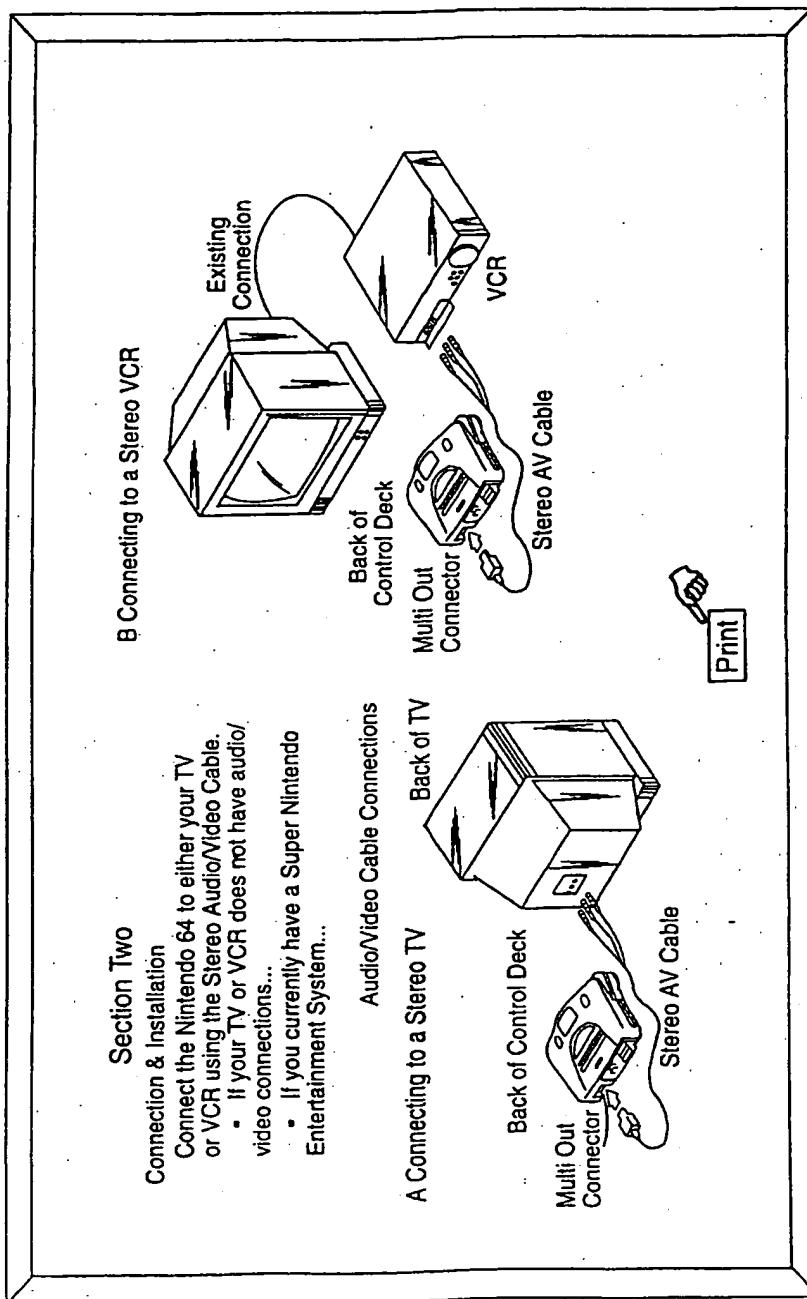


Fig. 17H

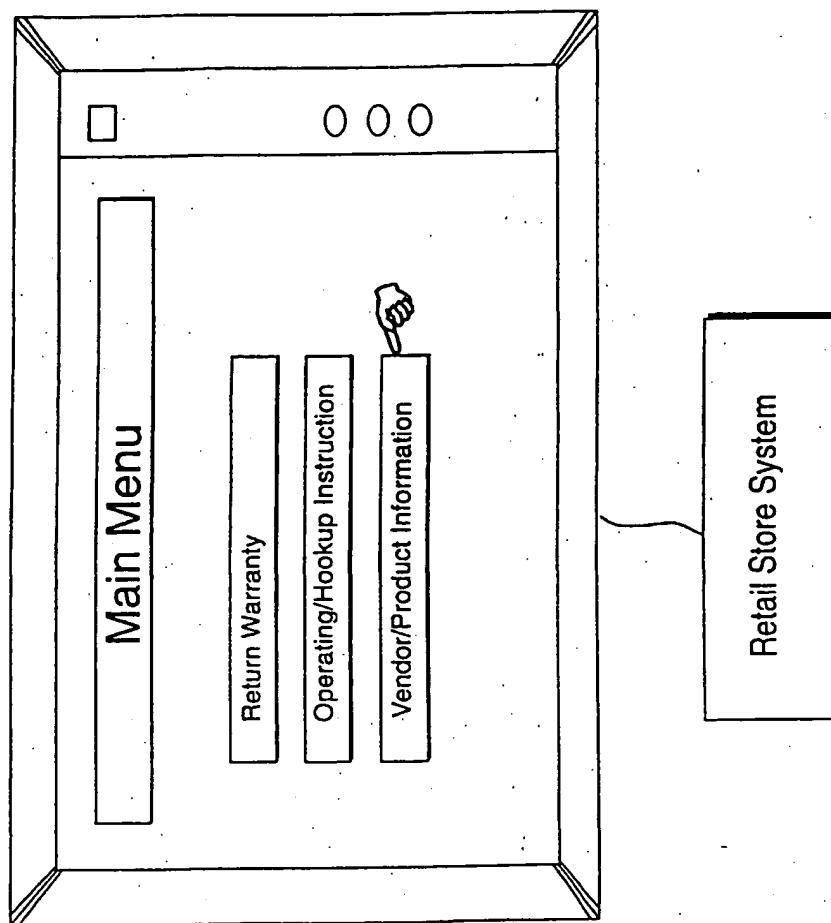


Fig. 18A

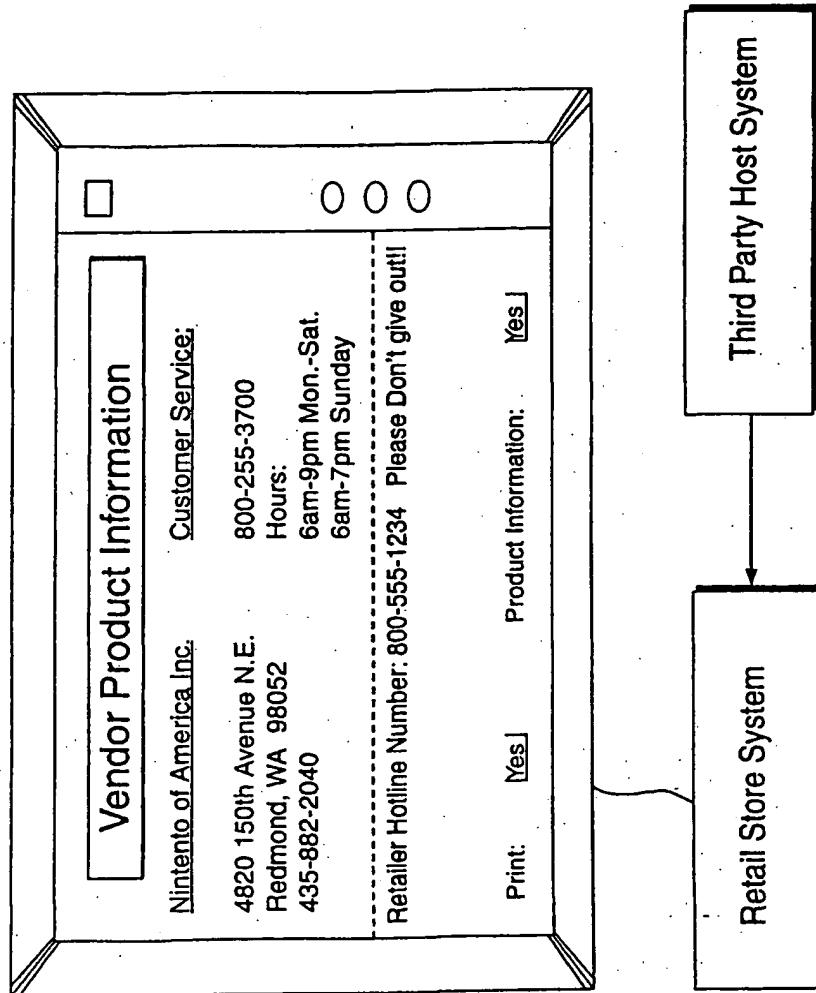


Fig. 18B

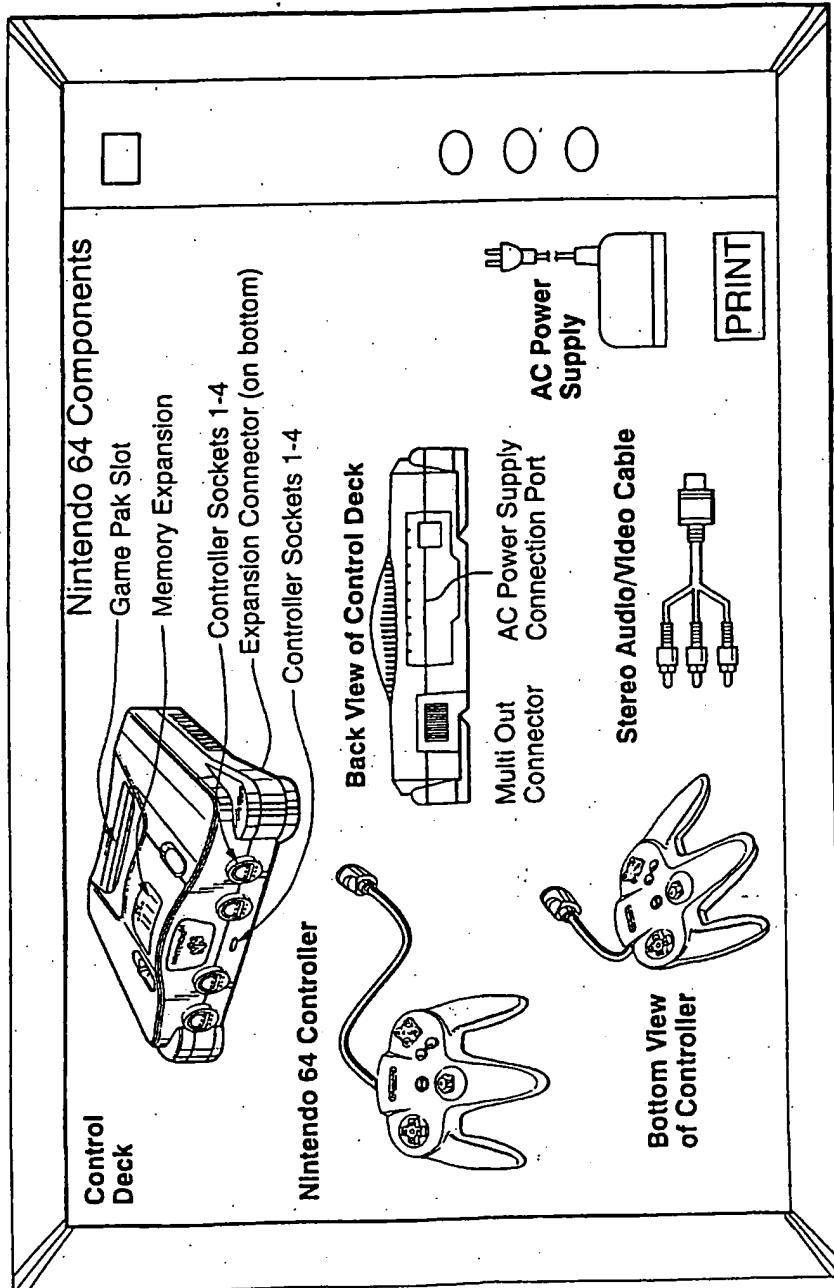


Fig. 18C

40/42

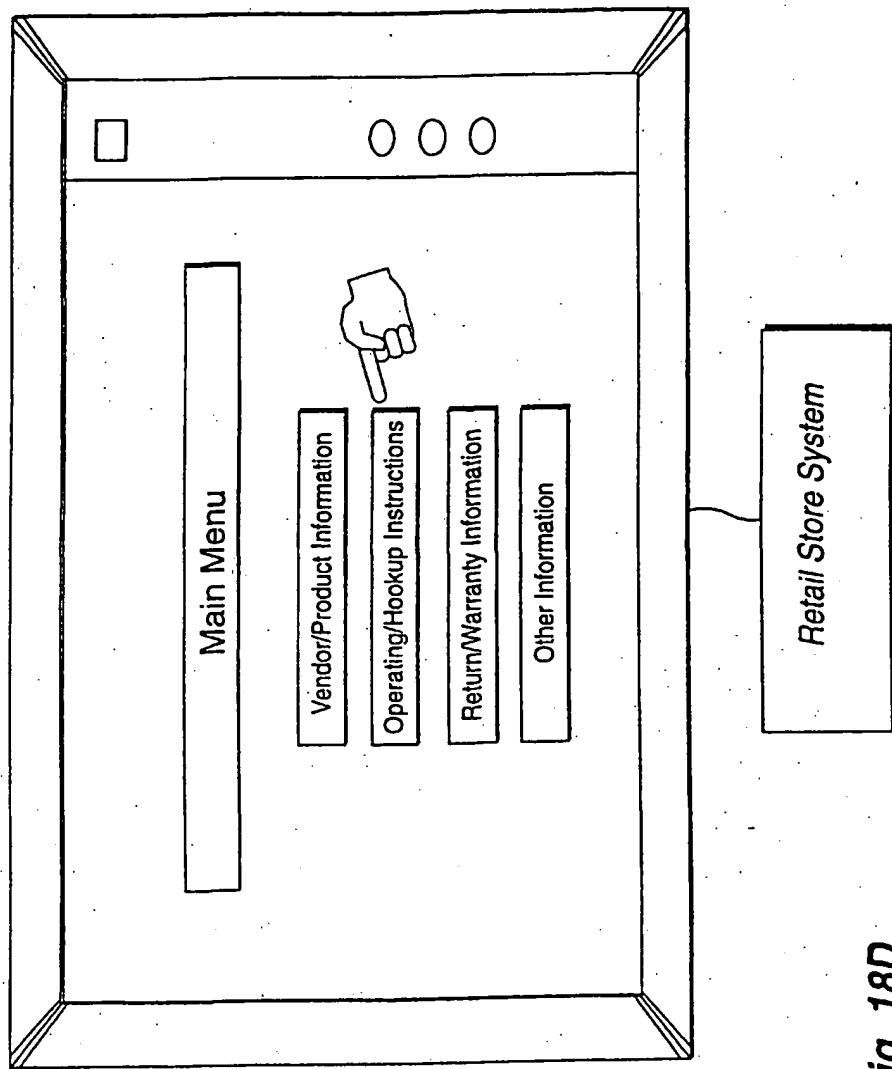


Fig. 18D

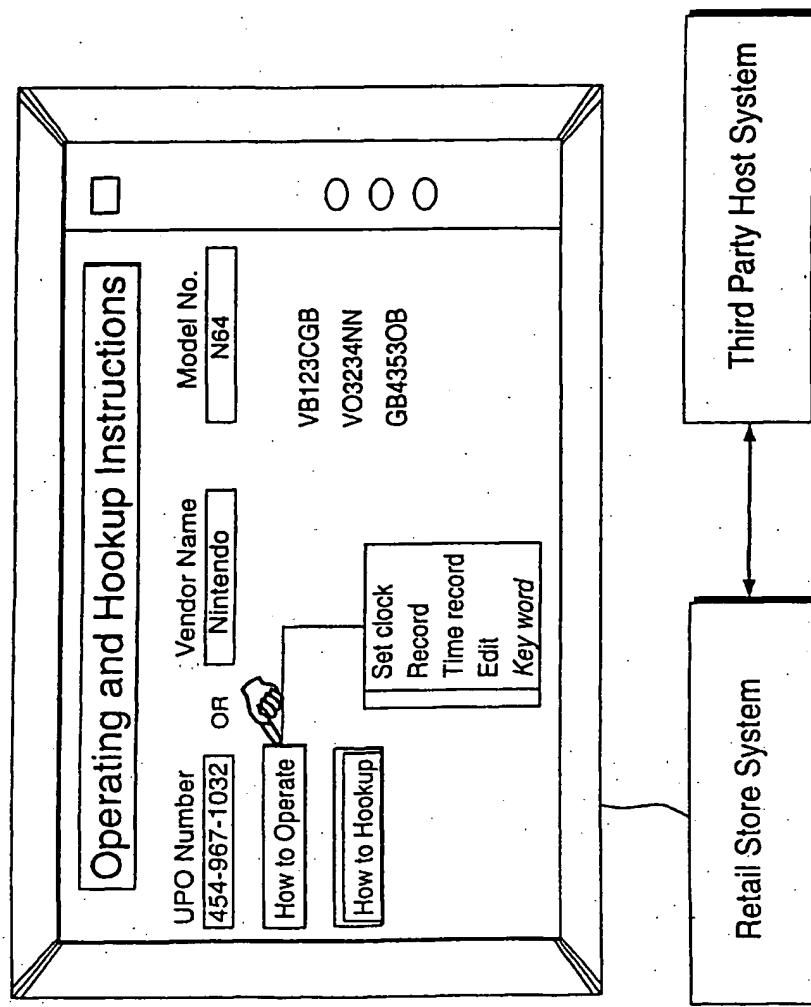


Fig. 18E

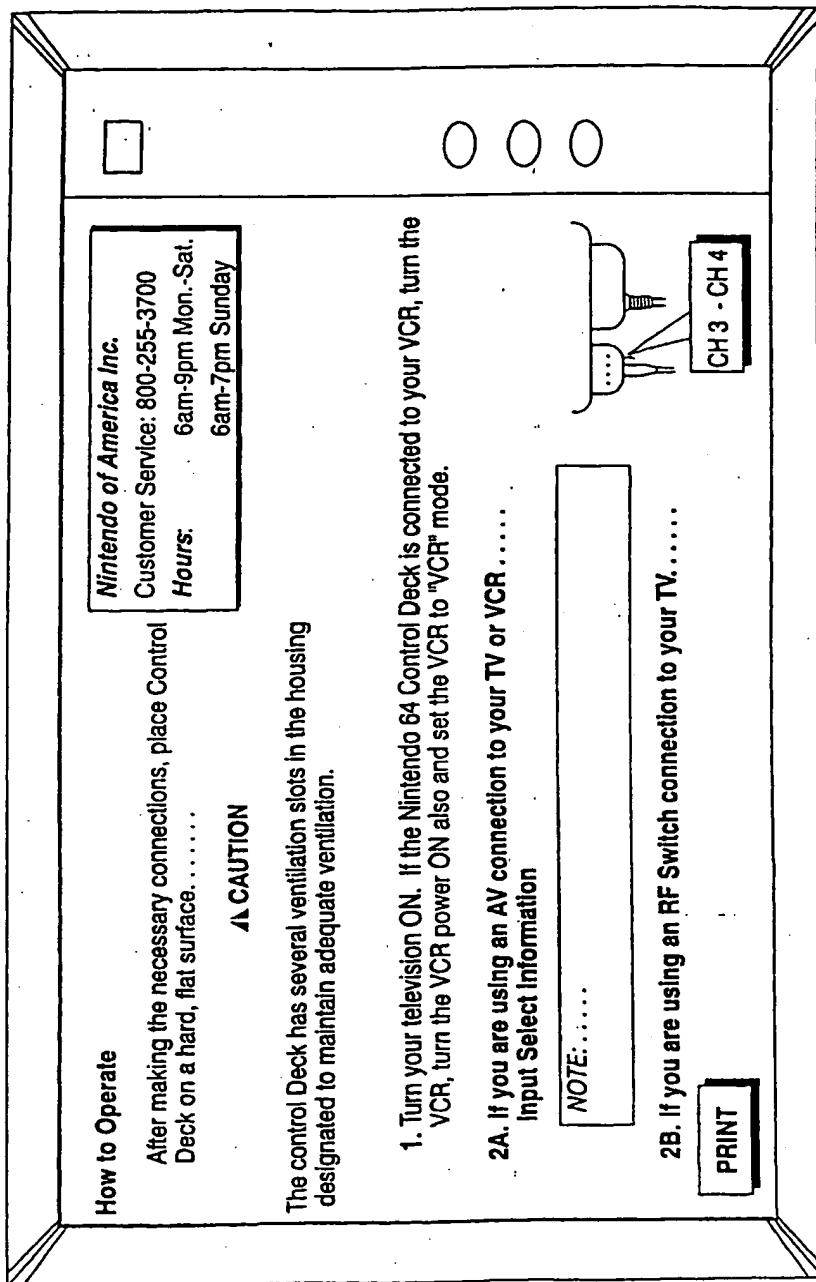


Fig. 18F

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.
PCT/US99/26460

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER IPC(6) :C06F 153:00 US CL :705/10, 16, 20, 22 According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC		
B. FIELDS SEARCHED Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols) U.S. : 705/10, 16, 20, 22		
Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched		
Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used).		
C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT		
Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
A	EP 0862154 A2 (KOMAI) 02 SEPTEMBER 1998 SEE COLUMN 7, LINE 5 TO COLUMN 12, LINE 54.	1-47
A	US 5,375,240 A (GRUNDY) 20 DECEMBER 1994, SEE COLUMN 7, LINE 24 TO COLUMN 13, LINE 51.	1-47
A	JP 10188141 A (TSUKAMOTO), 21 JULY 1998 SEE ABSTRACT.	1-47
<input type="checkbox"/> Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C. <input type="checkbox"/> See patent family annex.		
* Special categories of cited documents "A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance "B" earlier document published on or after the international filing date which may disclose details or property claimed in which is used to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reasons too specified "C" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means "D" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed		
Date of the actual completion of the international search 29 JANUARY 2000	Date of mailing of the international search report 21 MAR 2000	
Name and mailing address of the ISA/US Commissioner of Patents and Trademarks Box PCT Washington, D.C. 20231 Facsimile No. (703) 305-3230	Authorized officer FRANTZY POINV <i>James R. Matthews</i> Telephone No. (703) 305-9779	